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# HIMALAYAN TRADERS

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*Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf*

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# HIMALAYAN TRADERS

Life in Highland Nepal

JOHN MURRAY



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*To my Nepalese companions  
in travel and research*

DOR BAHADUR BISTA  
HARKA BAHADUR GURUNG  
UPENDRA MAN MALLA  
NAVIN KUMAR RAI  
BET PRAKASH UPRETI

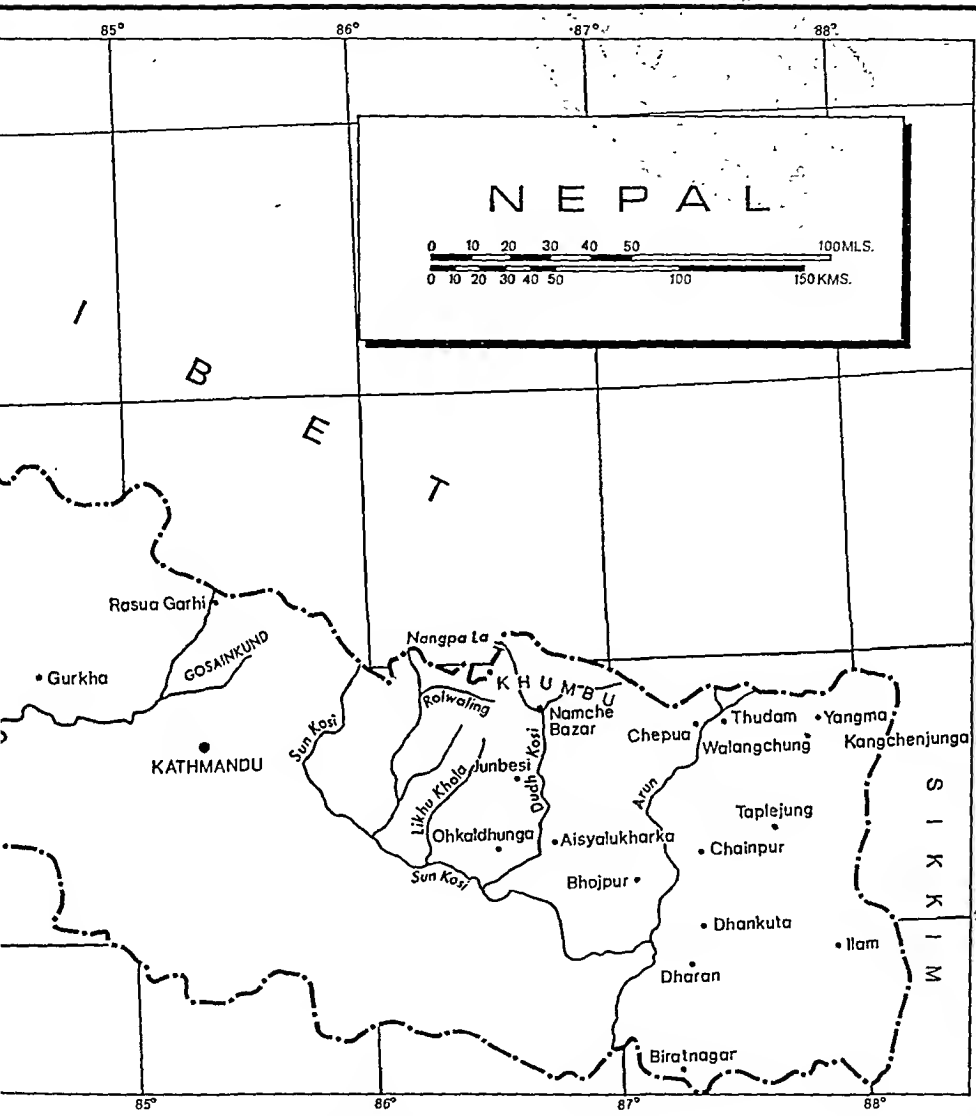
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of this book, for unlike some other anthropologists I have not found it necessary to disguise the personalities of the men figuring in case histories.

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Anthropological research is expensive, particularly if it involves long journeys with porters or pack-animals through difficult mountain country. In the course of the work which resulted in this book we traversed on foot, in various stages and at different times, the entire length of Nepal from the pass overlooking the Tibetan region of Taklakot in the north-west to the approaches to Darjeeling in the east. A great part of the costs of these journeys was borne by the School of Oriental and African Studies, but I benefited also from generous grants of the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the London-Cornell Project for the Study of Far Eastern and South-east Asian Societies, and the Central Research Fund of the University of London. To all these institutions I am greatly indebted.

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CHRISTOPH VON FÜRER-HAIMENDORF

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February 1974*

# Introduction

Until the middle of the twentieth century the regions of high altitude on Nepal's northern border were virtually unknown to western travellers and no anthropologist had ever set eyes on any of the inhabitants. The policy of the xenophobic Rana régime had been to exclude foreigners from the greater part of Nepal, and while a few carefully screened outsiders had been able to visit the Kathmandu valley, not even the members of the staff of the British Residency were allowed to travel in the remoter hill regions. Hence the fairly detailed, though still fragmentary knowledge of the civilizations of Nepal's heartland was contrasted by an almost complete lack of information on the extensive border-regions populated by communities of Tibetan speech and Buddhist faith.

When in 1953 Nepal opened its frontiers to outsiders, and I had an opportunity to undertake an anthropological reconnaissance of parts of Eastern Nepal, I set myself the task of exploring over the years as many of the areas of high altitude as possible. In the course of successive periods of fieldwork extending over two decades I studied representative samples of the populations inhabiting the northern borderlands of the kingdom, and this study led inevitably to the gathering of data on the trans-Himalayan trade which represents an essential element in the economy of the majority of mountain-dwellers. An analysis of this trade, which for centuries had linked Tibet, Nepal and India, promised to be of all the greater interest as it provided an insight into trading methods that in other parts of the world belong to the distant past. In the Nepal Himalayas both the means of transport and the basic character of this trade remained constant over long periods of time, and it was not until the occupation of Tibet by Chinese forces in 1959 and the resultant political and economic upheaval throughout the regions adjoining Northern Nepal that traditional trade relations were suddenly disrupted.

The change in the conditions of the mountain-dwellers on the Nepalese side of the border brought about by these developments is one of the main themes of this book. We shall see how the

various ethnic groups reacted to the decline in trans-Himalayan trade in different ways, and how such communities as the Sherpas were able to develop alternative sources of income, while others abandoned their home-villages and, moving to lower regions, adopted a new way of life. In a changing situation a diachronic treatment of the material is essential for an understanding of the processes involved, but the application of such treatment is limited by the availability of information covering a reasonable time-span. In the case of the Sherpas whom I visited in 1953, 1957 and 1971, I have first-hand experience of the changing scene in Khumbu, but in some other cases I had to rely on interviews with persons whom I had originally met in their home environment, and whom some ten or more years later I encountered in Kathmandu. In Humla, finally, which I visited for the first time in 1972, the process of change could be traced only by depending on the memory of men who have seen the old order and are conscious of the fact that they are living in a period of transition likely to revolutionize their whole life-style.

The first four chapters of the present volume are in some sense a sequel to my book *The Sherpas of Nepal* (London 1964) and besides dealing with subjects not covered in that work, they describe in some detail the transformation of the pattern of Sherpa life which I observed during a visit in 1971. By that time the Sherpas of the Khumbu region had succeeded in reorientating their economy which in the past had depended to a large extent on the trade with their Tibetan neighbours. Speaking a Tibetan dialect and professing lamaistic Buddhism they had been used to moving freely through Tibet and had established profitable business relations with Tibetans of the nearby Tingri district as well as from towns as distant as Shigatse and Lhasa. The pursuit of trade also took them to the grain-growing valleys of Nepal's middle-ranges, and even further afield to the low-lying Terai and the adjoining districts of India. Kathmandu and the other towns of the Nepal valley lay outside the grid of the Khumbu Sherpas' trade routes, but Sherpas of Solu visited these cities for purposes of trade (see p. 71) and even people of Khumbu went there occasionally in the course of pilgrimages to the Buddhist sanctuaries of Bodhnath and Swayambunath. The main flow of Sherpa trade ran then along a north-south axis, but the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the

resulting drastic restrictions on the movement of goods along the traditional routes linking Tibet with Nepal led to major changes in the basic structure of Sherpa economics. Had the Chinese stranglehold on the Sherpas' trade occurred even twenty years earlier the effect on their standard of living would have been catastrophic. Indeed it might well have caused a depopulation of the region of high altitude where farmers and pastoralists can only subsist if their income is supplemented by outside earnings. Fortunately for the Sherpas the checks on their trading activities imposed by political events in a neighbouring country coincided with the opening of Nepal to foreigners and the subsequent development of mountaineering and tourism which soon became major sources of income benefiting the inhabitants of the areas most attractive to visitors. Today earnings from employment in the service of mountaineers and tourists have replaced the gains derived from the trade with Tibet, and the Sherpas have been able to maintain and in certain respects even to improve their standard of living. Not surprisingly the reorientation of their economy has had profound effects on their entire way of life. The process of change initially set in motion by the Chinese interference with the traditional border trade has been accelerated by the political reorganization of the whole of Nepal as well as by innovations brought about by such foreign organizations as the education programme sponsored by Sir Edmund Hillary. The economic developments now taking place in the Sherpa country cannot be divorced from the current changes in social attitudes and we shall see that economic, social and political trends interlock and reinforce each other.

Twenty-one years have elapsed since I first visited Khumbu, but so great have been the changes that it seems doubtful whether the traditional economic and social order which I then observed could be reconstructed by a study of the Sherpas as they are today. The complicated system of the barter trade with Tibet, for instance, will soon vanish from the memory of the Sherpas more and more drawn into a monetary economy subject to the inflationary trends characteristic of the present situation in Nepal as well as India. Modern developments, such as the shortage of agricultural labour, become explicable when seen against the background of the changes in the earning potential of landless men within the past sixteen years, and the contraction of the Sherpas' pastoral activities

finds its explanation in the diminished opportunities for the cattle-trade with Tibet which in 1957 was still flourishing.

Apart from contrasting the traditional pattern of Sherpa economics observed in 1953 and 1957 with the conditions prevailing in Khumbu in 1971, I shall present comparative material from other regions of high altitude of Nepal. This will serve to demonstrate the range of variations within the economic system of the Tibetan speaking populations of Nepal, populations known by the generic term Bhotia, and highlight the features peculiar to the Sherpas and not shared by groups living in a similar environment. The data relating to these Bhotia communities were collected at various times between 1957 and 1972. They lack the time depth of the diachronic documentation of Sherpa economics, but enable us to visualize in broad outlines the ecology and economic conditions prevailing within Nepal's northern borderlands from the area adjoining Sikkim to the east as far as the valley of the Humla Karnali to the west. Chapters 6-8 will provide an overall view of the socio-economic conditions within a sample of Tibetan-speaking high-altitude dwellers and amplify the very meagre ethnographic information on the Buddhist border tribes. The common factor in the economy of all these populations is a relatively inhospitable environment which precludes sole reliance on farming, and compels the inhabitants of the highlands to seek in mobility and adventurous trading enterprises alternative means of subsistence. To a greater or lesser degree all these populations have been dependent on barter trade with Tibet and they have all been affected by the recent subjugation of their former trading partners by their Chinese rulers, and the resultant dwindling of the traditional exchange of goods.

In the chapters dealing with Bhotias of Western Nepal we shall see, however, that the restrictions on trans-Himalayan trade imposed by the Chinese authorities are not the only threat to the prosperity of the high-altitude dwellers on the Nepalese side of the frontier. Another development, unconnected with the political events in Tibet, is even more ominous. The trade in Tibetan salt, which for centuries has been the mainstay of the mercantile activities of all the border-people, could thrive as long as Tibetan salt had a virtual monopoly throughout the middle-ranges. Lack of communications and the dread of malaria in the Terai and the foot-



hills excluded Indian salt from this market, and those who carried supplies of Tibetan salt along tortuous caravan routes across the Himalayan main range were sure of being able to barter this essential commodity for many times its volume in grain. Today this monopoly has been broken. Malaria no longer infests the Terai and the foothills, and several motorable roads lead from India into the heart of the middle-ranges. Cheap Indian salt penetrates along these roads into areas which even ten years ago were the exclusive preserve of the traders in Tibetan salt. As the zone of Indian commercial influence expands, the scope for their barter trade shrinks, and the time may not be far off when, unable to dispose of Tibetan salt at economic rates, the Bhotias of the high valleys can no longer obtain the rice and other grain which they require both for their own needs and for re-export to Tibet. A way of life which involves a high degree of mobility, mercantile skills and the entrepreneurial courage to risk capital may thus be soon a thing of the past, and this places the anthropologist, still able to observe the functioning of the trans-Himalayan barter trade in all its details, under the urgent obligation to record a type of commerce soon to disappear from the face of the earth.

The Sherpas whose social and religious life formed the subject of my earlier book, are only one of the many Bhotia populations on Nepal's northern border. The spread of a variety of Bhotia groups along that border is so wide and there are such great variations in dialect and customs that one cannot expect any overt sense of solidarity among the numerous dispersed groups. But when in the course of travel and trade Sherpas encounter members of any of these Bhotia groups, they approach them in a way quite different from the attitude they adopt in dealings with other ethnic groups of Nepal. Between Sherpas and such tribal groups as Rais or Gurungs there may be mutual respect, but also the consciousness of the basic cultural differences, and *vis-à-vis* the higher Hindu castes Sherpas and other Bhotias often feel inhibited by the knowledge that as eaters of beef and drinkers of liquor they are in Hindu eyes of very low ritual status and subject to restrictions usually imposed only on untouchable castes.

On the other hand, when Bhotias of whatever regions encounter each other, they can take a great deal of common ground for granted. They know that no Bhotia has any objection to sharing

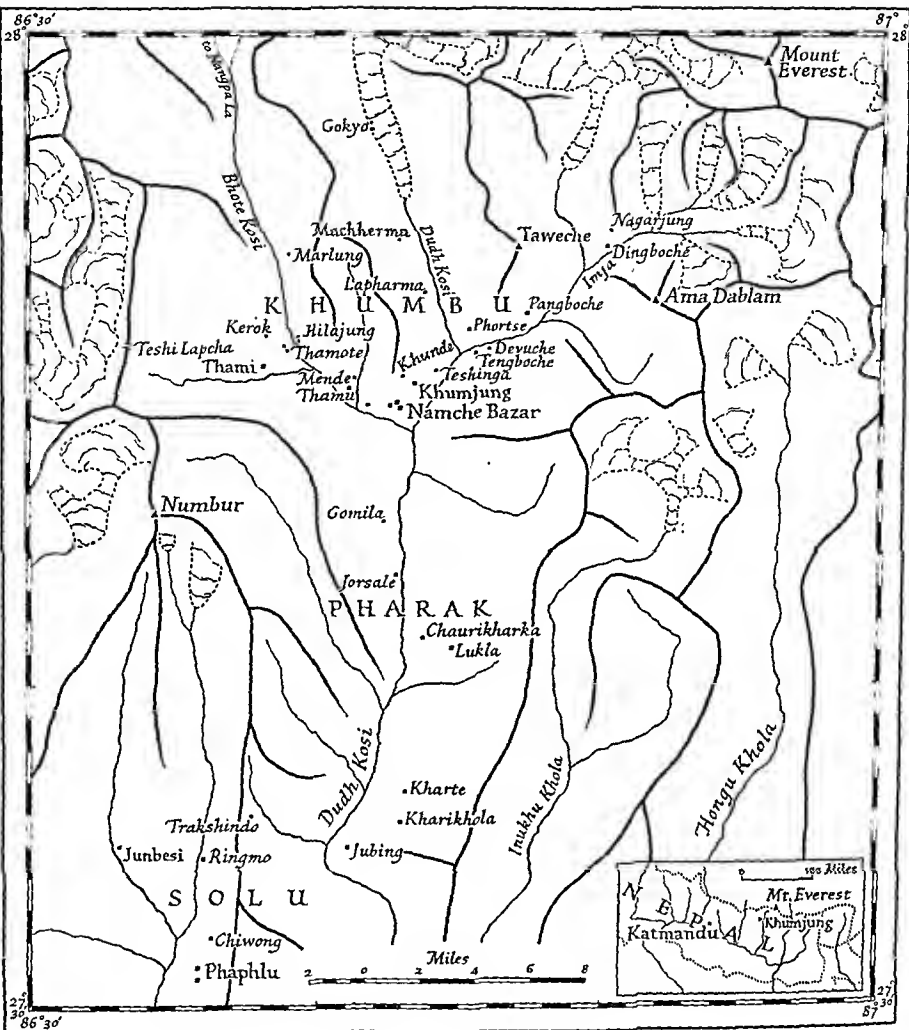
the food of people of other ethnic stock and they are assured, therefore, that they will not suffer a rebuff when offering or requesting hospitality. Though dialects may differ, understanding between Sherpas and Bhotias of any of the border regions of Nepal is usually adequate for at least a limited conversation about practical matters. There is, moreover, the awareness of a common religious tradition, and of a body of sacred scriptures accessible to all those able to read and write Tibetan. As the percentage of literates is high among Sherpas and many, though not all, Bhotia groups, the use of identical or at least similar liturgical texts is a further factor making for the unity of the Bhotia populations settled along the Nepal-Tibet border.

## The Sherpa Settlement Pattern

The pattern of Sherpa settlement is of a complexity unusual among other Tibetan-speaking high-altitude dwellers of Nepal. The mobility forced upon the Sherpa husbandman by climate and environment has led to a proliferation of dwellings, each inhabited at certain times of the year and adapted to specific uses. While systems of transhumance, involving seasonal movements, of individuals or whole families, are widespread among the pastoral peoples of the Himalayas, it is only among the Sherpas and some of the Bhotias of Humla that families own several solidly built houses in widely separated localities. Though the recent contraction of pastoral activities in Khumbu has resulted in the abandonment of some subsidiary dwellings, the changes in the character of settlements have been relatively insignificant and the vast majority of Sherpas continue to live in houses of traditional style.

In the Khumbu region we can distinguish between three types of permanent settlements: main villages, winter settlements and summer settlements. The main villages are inhabited throughout the year, and there people have their principal houses which contain most of their household goods and all valuable possessions. Subsidiary settlements, situated at different levels of altitude, are much smaller, and there the houses are less spacious and less well furnished, and people stay only during specific times of the year. Those lying in sheltered valleys at elevations lower than the average altitude of the main villages are inhabited mostly during the coldest months of the winter, whereas the settlements in the high pasture lands above the tree-line are populated mainly, though not exclusively, during the summer months.

The Sherpa word for village is *yul*, and though in its narrow sense applicable only to main villages it is sometimes used also in relation to the larger subsidiary settlements. When referring not only to the houses and village-site, but also to the fields, meadows,



wasteland and forest belonging to a village, the Sherpas often use the term *lungba*, derived from *lung*, which means valley.

The settlements situated in the lower and in the sheltered parts of valleys are known as *gunsa* (*gun* – winter) whereas subsidiary settlements in higher altitudes are known as *yersa* (*yer* – summer; Tibetan: *dbyar-sa*) or *phu*, Sherpa words which correspond to the Nepali term *goth*. *Sa* is a Tibetan term for 'place'.

Different from all these settlements which consist of solidly built houses, surrounded by fields or at least some walled-in meadows, are the primitive camping places known as *resa*, where herdsmen spend the nights when grazing their yak on pastures at some distance from any of their more permanent settlements.

## *Main villages*

While the Khumbu region is dotted with numerous subsidiary settlements inhabited often only for a few weeks in the year, the number of main villages is strictly limited. In the triangle enclosed by Dudh Kosi and Bhote Kosi there are Namche Bazar, Khumjung and Khunde, in the upper Dudh Kosi valley there is Phortse, and in the valley of the Imja Khola there is the ancient village of Pangboche and a comparably recent village known as Milingbo. The two monastic settlements of Tengboche and Devuche, though permanently inhabited, do not fall within the category of main villages and will be described in a different context.

In the valley of the Bhote Kosi the position is more complex. There we find the main villages of Thamo, Thami and Thamote, which are collectively known as Thamichok, as well as a number of smaller permanently inhabited settlements, which though spatially separated from each other, combine in ritual matters and assume thus collectively some of the characteristics of a main village.

Among the main villages Namche Bazar, known in Sherpa as Nauje, occupies a special place. It is principally a settlement of traders, and the cultivable area is so small that only a few of its seventy-three households can support themselves by the pursuit of agriculture. The villages of Khumjung, Khunde, Phortse, Pangboche, Thami and Thamote, on the other hand, all lie in localities where there is sufficient level space for fairly extensive cultivation. In the rugged country of Khumbu, where mountains of over 25,000

feet sweep up from narrow valleys, level land is exceedingly scarce, but wherever a broader valley or a sizeable ledge between mountain and river-gorge offers scope for cultivation, settlers have been attracted and permanent villages have sprung up. The twin villages Khumjung and Khunde occupy such a flat valley lying high above the level of the Dudh Kosi, and the position of Thami on a high broad side-valley of the Bhote Kosi is similar. Phortse, spread out over a gently sloping ledge, from the lower edge of which one looks straight down into the awe-inspiring gorge of the Dudh Kosi, is typical of the settlements occupying arable land which at one time in the remote geological past must have been part of a valley bottom. Since then the river has dug its course many hundred feet deeper, and a narrow gorge separates the shoulders and ledges standing out from the slopes to both sides of the valley. Smaller ledges of similar kind are occupied by some of the subsidiary settlements, and it is only rarely that such a ledge provides adequate space for the growth of a main village.

Arable land of sufficient acreage is not the sole factor determining a site's suitability for a permanent settlement. There must be a perennial source of water and an adequate supply of fire-wood within reach of the village. Settlements, such as Dingboche in the upper Imja Khola valley, which lie at too great a distance from the nearest wood-reserves, cannot be permanently inhabited even though there is sufficient arable land and ample water.

Despite great differences in the natural features of the various village-sites, there is a preferred pattern of settlement which manifests itself in nearly all the main villages. The houses are invariably scattered over a considerable area, with fields and kitchen gardens intervening between single homesteads or small groups of houses. Though two or three houses may stand in a line, they never face each other, and it is usual for the houses of a village, or at least of each part of a village, to face all in the same direction. Thus all the fifty-five houses in Phortse, except one, face towards the Dudh Kosi gorge, and all those of Thami are built with their backs towards the head of the valley leading to the snow-covered slopes of the Teshi Lapcha, and with their fronts towards the Bhote Kosi valley.

A modification of this pattern occurs in villages such as Namche Bazar, where the houses stand in a semi-circle, built against the

slopes of a natural amphitheatre. In this case they face towards the centre and lowest point of the amphitheatre, and the limitations of the site do not permit the usual spread-out arrangements, fields and gardens being small or non-existent, and many of the houses standing closely crowded together.

Every village has either a *gompa*, a Buddhist temple, or at least a building, referred to simply as *mani*, which contains an enormous prayer wheel. These buildings, which are invariably painted red and surmounted by a gilded spire, are among the outward signs distinguishing a main village from a subsidiary settlement. Other religious structures found in all main villages, but occasionally also in subsidiary settlements or even on passes far from any human habitation, are the great stupa-like *chorten*, locally known as *bauddha*, and *mani*-walls surmounted by stone slabs each with an inscription in Tibetan characters. Some of the villages boast in addition a free standing village-gate (*kani*), a square structure whose interior walls and ceiling bear religious paintings in vivid colours.

Apart from these religious structures, there are no public buildings of any kind. Sherpas accommodate travellers and traders in their own houses, and hence there is no need for the rest-houses or *dharamsala* found in many of the Hindu villages of Nepal. In the absence of caste-prejudices and the fear of pollution even European and American travellers never fail to obtain a place at the hearth and some sleeping space in a private house. Public gatherings of a secular nature are usually not held in buildings, but in the open, and in most villages there is a roughly circular raised platform sufficiently large to accommodate all the villagers likely to attend such a gathering.

A main village consists not only of homesteads and the individually owned walled-in gardens, fields and meadows, but also of the common pastures and the forest belonging to the whole of the village-community. Such common land extends from the cultivated area as far as the boundary (*chindzam*) which divides the land of one village from that of another.

At altitudes above 12,000 feet wood is a scarce commodity and the preservation of the forest growth within the boundaries of the village-land used to be the responsibility of forest-guards (*shingo naua*) acting on behalf of the village-community. The selection and

function of these village-officials has been described in *The Sherpas of Nepal* (pp. 110-13), but since my observations in 1953 and 1957 the system of forest-preservation has changed and we shall see in Chapter 4 (p. 97) that in the course of a reorganization of the district administration the control of forest-resources has been transferred to the authority of the district *panchayat*. Traditionally, however, the inhabitants of a main village held the natural resources of the surrounding country in common. Such a community appeared thus as entirely distinct from the casual accumulation of families owning houses and land in subsidiary settlements.

The use of pasture land surrounding a village is open to all villagers, not only for grazing their cattle but even for cutting grass to be stored as fodder for the winter. Members of the village community used to have the right, moreover, to carve new terrace fields from the common land normally used as pastures, but this right is now – at least in theory – subject to the sanction of the district authorities. The scope for such an extension of cultivation to the hill-slopes has always been limited by the nature of the terrain. Any resulting loss of grazing land is negligible in view of large areas too deep or rocky for such conversion which in every village are open to the Sherpas' cattle.

Only the reserved forest and those pastures surrounding the cultivated area from which the village-assembly can banish all cattle during certain times of the year (cf. p. 28), can strictly be called village-land. The members of a village-community also have the right to graze their cattle on pastures much further from the main settlement, but this right is not exclusive; members of several villages share in the use of the same high pastures. It is on such pastures that many of the subsidiary settlements are situated, and we shall see presently that they are not mere extensions of the one or other main village, but settlements without definite ritual and social affiliations where members of several villages hold property and hence enjoy equal rights.

### *Subsidiary settlements*

The settlement pattern of the Sherpas of Khumbu developed at a time when the average family spent only six to eight months of the year in a main village. In the case of the owners of yak this



period was often reduced to as little as four or five months, and the rest of the year was spent in various subsidiary settlements. Recent changes in the Sherpas' economic activities (see p. 57) have led to a decrease in the number of families living for long periods in settlements close to the high pastures, but even so periodic movements between different localities remain a characteristic feature of Sherpa life. Also some men involved in the tourist industry maintain temporary establishments in Kathmandu.

Subsidiary settlements consisting of solid houses and walled-in fields or meadows fall into two distinct categories, *gunsa* and *yorsa* (or *phu*). *Gunsa* are settlements situated at altitudes lower than those of the main villages, either on ledges closer to the level of such rivers as the Dudh Kosi and Bhote Kosi, or on narrow strips of level land along the banks of these rivers. Sheltered by the mountains rising steeply from the gorge-like valleys, they enjoy a milder climate than the more open main villages, and it is for this reason that many families move for the coldest part of the winter to one of the *gunsa* settlements. But this is not the only advantage of settlements lying anything between 800 and 1,500 feet lower than the main villages. Potatoes planted at such altitudes ripen earlier than those on the fields of the main villages, and this enables the Sherpas to spread the agricultural work over a longer period, and have new supplies of their basic food several weeks before the main harvest. Once the harvest has been gathered in the *gunsa*-settlements, they are opened to the cattle, and yak can be kept there and grazed on the nearby slopes, while the main villages with their ripening crops are still closed to all livestock. At that time, namely in late September and early October, the grass on the higher pastures has already suffered from the effect of heavy frosts, and yak-owners prefer therefore to keep their animals for some weeks in sheltered valleys, where there is still ample grazing.

The number of houses in a *gunsa*-settlement, may be anything between 2 and 30. On sites close to the bank of a river, there is often space only for a very few houses and small potato patches, but the *gunsa*-settlement of Teshinga situated on a broad ledge above the Dudh Kosi gorge, rivals in size some of the smaller main villages. In 1957 this settlement, which lies about an hour's walk from Khumjung, contained 26 houses. Of the houses, many

of which are double-storeyed, 15 belonged to people of Khumjung, and 11 to people of Khunde, and the distribution of fields and meadows followed a similar pattern. Most of the families owning houses and land in Teshinga spend several weeks there in the autumn, again some weeks during the coldest part of the winter, and a short time in the spring when the fields have to be prepared for the sowing of potatoes. The weeding of the potato fields is usually done by women who go there for the day, but return to Khumjung or Khunde for the night. The potatoes harvested at Teshinga and other *gunsa*-settlements are for the most part kept there, to be eaten when the owners of the fields are in residence, and similarly the hay made in the meadows is stored as fodder for the cattle to be used in the early spring.

The number of *gunsa*-settlements is comparatively small, for the narrow valleys of the two main rivers of Khumbu do not offer much scope for the establishment of settlements with sufficient fields or meadows to make the building of houses worth the effort. Though the owners of yak find it convenient to own property in such winter settlements, it is possible to do without it and use temporary shelters of the *resa*-type at the time when the cattle are to be grazed in the lower parts of the valley.

The rôle of the subsidiary settlements known as *yorsa* or *phu* is very different. Ownership of houses and meadows in some of these settlements situated among the high pastures above the tree-level is an indispensable concomitant of yak-breeding. Without such property no one can maintain even a moderately sized herd of yak, and all yak-owners spend a large part of the year in settlements comparable to the *Almen* of the Alps.

While a sheltered position and the availability of cultivable land are determining factors for the choice of a site for a *gunsa*-settlement, the vicinity of good, open pasture-land is of vital importance for a *yorsa*-settlement. Apart from altitude and environment such a settlement is not inherently different from a *gunsa*-settlement. The houses are very much the same and there are walled-in meadows and, except in the very highest settlements, also a few walled-in potato-plots. But ownership of houses and land in *yorsa*-settlements is of value only to the breeders of livestock. In order to be near their yak grazing on the high pastures, cattle-owners have

to build or acquire houses in remote hill regions, and the necessity to feed the yak on hay during the long months of winter leads them to wall-in meadows where hay can be made to be stored for use at a time when the pastures are covered by snow.

However, there is one *yersa*-settlement in Khumbu which does not answer this description. Dingboche, lying at an altitude of 14,350 feet in a broad valley on the upper Imja Khola, shows certain features not shared by other high-altitude settlements. In Dingboche barley is grown on irrigated fields, and land-holdings there are valuable quite apart from the place's use as a base for yak-herders.

Ownership of property in a high-altitude settlement is not confined to the people of a single main village, but in some of the larger *yersa* there are houses and meadows belonging to people of two or even three different villages. The families congregated in such a settlement at any particular time, are not a section of a village-community, and disperse again after a few weeks co-residence in the same locality.

Similar in purpose to the *yersa*-settlement, but very different in form are the primitive encampments known as *resa*. These structures consisting of a permanent, though crudely built stone wall, and a temporary roof of bamboo mats or yak-hair blankets, serve the herdsmen as shelters on pastures where they have no solid houses, but where it is convenient to graze the cattle for a few days. They are found on very high pastures, beyond the highest *yersa*-settlement, and again at fairly low levels so close to the main villages, that young boys can look after the cattle during the day and adults need go there only for the night in order to be near their animals in case of an attack by wolves or leopards. Though several such shelters may stand in small clusters, and the inhabitants use the same spring and graze their cattle on the same pastures, *resa* can hardly be described as settlements. Never more than one or two persons will sleep there and the scanty utensils they take gives their stay the character of casual camping. Yet the stone walls of *resa* are privately owned, even though the pastures on which they stand are communal property. Most cattle-owners possess a fairly large number of *resa*, but use each shelter only for a few days a year.

More ephemeral than *resa* are shelters known as *kyasa*. These

consist of a portable bamboo mat, rigged up as a roof with the help of poles. The Sherpas of Khumbu erect shelters of *kyasa*-type on the hill-slopes surrounding the main villages, but in Pharak and Solu *kyasa* are often found in small forest-clearings where herds-men camp with their cattle.

## *Houses*

With the exception of temporary *kyasa*- and *resa*-shelters, all Sherpa dwellings are constructed solidly of timber and stone. Many of the houses in the main villages are substantial, spacious buildings, but even some houses in *gunsa*- and *yorsa*-settlements afford their owners far more comfort than one might expect of dwellings inhabited for only a few weeks in the year.

There is little variety in the style and pattern of building except for the distinction between the single-storeyed houses of the poorer people, and the more numerous double-storeyed buildings of those better off. Some old men told me that in their childhood the percentage of double-storeyed houses was much smaller than it is now, but against this must be held the fact that, before the earthquake of 1933, there were in Khumbu several houses of three storeys, and such houses are still common among the wealthier Sherpas of the Solu region. In the village of Khumjung there were in 1957 some twenty-five single-storeyed houses owned mainly by the poorer Khamba immigrants, but by 1971 several of these dwellings had been rebuilt as double-storeyed houses and there were not more than ten single-storeyed houses left.

All houses consist of a framework of wooden posts and walls built of crudely dressed stone. Mortar made of clay, sand and yak-dung is smeared into the cracks between the stones, and the resultant rather rough surface is white-washed. A framework of strong, roughly dressed posts carries the roof, and – in double-storeyed houses – also the large floor-boards of the upper storey. Sherpa carpenters do not use nails but they know how to make lasting joints. On the wooden rafters of the moderately inclined roof rest broad pine planks, and these are weighed down by large, heavy stones in a manner reminiscent of Swiss alpine houses.

The ground floor of double-storeyed houses serves partly as a store for firewood, agricultural implements, baskets, pack-saddles



The house of a Konje Chunbi, a wealthy Sherpa  
of Khumjung village

The main room of the house of Kana Kalden.



Sherpa woman feeding salt to a yak at milking time  
Sherpa girls harvesting potatoes

and similar chattels, and partly as shelter for such animals as cows, goats and sheep which unlike yak cannot be left in the open in cold weather. Most of the bigger houses have two front doors. One leads into a windowless room, unconnected with the rest of the house, which even though intended as a store may temporarily be occupied by recent arrivals or more permanently by a widow or other poor single persons in want of shelter. As long as Tibetans could freely cross the border into Khumbu, seasonal labourers often stayed in such ground-floor rooms for the duration of their employment, and in 1971 a few ground-floor rooms were inhabited by some of the few Tibetan refugees who had stayed on in Khumbu. The other front-door gives access to the main part of the house. It leads into the larger part of the ground-floor and it is there that at night one may find an assortment of domestic animals, including some of the female cross-breeds (*dzo-mo*) kept in the village for purposes of milking. The floor is covered by a thick layer of dry leaves, collected in the forest and spread to be saturated and mixed with the dung of the cattle, to be ultimately used as valuable manure to be spread on the potato and buckwheat plots.

Steep wooden stairs lead from the dark ground-floor space to the first floor and the main room of the house. Here the owners cook, eat, sleep, receive guests and perform most household tasks. In the homes of the rich it is up to 40 or 50 feet long and some 16 feet broad, and at weddings or other festive gatherings will accommodate as many as a hundred guests, but even in average homes it is a fairly spacious room with ample space for the usual family gathering. There is little variety in the furnishings, and the placing of hearth, main bench, bedstead and shelves follows a constant pattern.

On the front side of the house there are invariably two or three windows. They can be closed with wooden shutters, but during the day they have to be kept open to let in the light. Wooden gratings set into the window and covered with a strong, parchment-like paper were until recently the only way of keeping out cold winds without completely shutting out the daylight. In 1957 glass window-panes were virtually unknown in Khumbu, but by 1971 several enterprising men had brought small panes of glass from Kathmandu, and fitted them into the windows of their house. In an area where temperatures below freezing point are normal during

a large part of the year, such glass window-panes are a great advantage, and their use is on the increase. While other aspects of Sherpa houses have remained unchanged, glass windows have become a prestige symbol, and the comfort they provide makes them desirable even for those who lack the ambition to compete with their neighbours in introducing prestigious innovations. Laden porters take some fifteen days for the trip from Kathmandu to Khumbu, and window glass, which has to be carried carefully, is hence still a relatively expensive commodity. But Sherpas working for mountaineering expeditions have occasionally the chance to bring window-panes by air as far as Lukla, an airstrip less than two days' walk from Khumjung, and this facility, enjoyed free in some cases, has contributed to the spread of glass windows in the home villages of prominent climbers. Four small squares of glass are used for the average window and the price of such a square in 1971 was R20.

A constant feature of all Sherpa houses is a long window-bench, running along the front wall of the main room. One or more low tables stand in front of this bench, and all food and drink served to men of the house and male guests is placed on these tables. The traditional seat of the head of the household is the one nearest to the fire-place, and when guests are entertained they sit according to an order of ranking determined by seniority and such criteria as wealth and prominence in village affairs. Women never sit on the window-bench but squat on rugs or skins around the hearth.

The hearth consists of a square of hardened clay let into the wooden floor-boards and an elevated clay-structure built against the front wall, where cooking pots can be kept warm. On the open fire-place there used to be one or more iron stands or several stones to support pots or frying pans. As the open fire consumed much wood which is now in short supply, many families have installed a modified hearth made of a kerosene tin. The sides of the tin have been partly cut out, and the fuel is lit inside the remaining frame which has the effect of concentrating the heat on the cooking vessel placed on top of the tin. While economizing on fire-wood this contraption deprives those sitting round the hearth of much of the glow of the fire. In the village of Khumjung the decreased supply and consumption of fire-wood has become very noticeable. Whereas



previously fires were kept going whenever people were in the house and in need of warmth, there is now a tendency to light fires only when food has to be cooked and even then people use as little fuel as possible.

Built against the back and side walls of the house there are wooden shelves often attractively carved, and in the houses of wealthy families some of these shelves carry long rows of shining copper and brass vessels. Except for two or three large cauldrons required for storing water and normally situated opposite the hearth, these vessels are seldom in use, and serve mainly as decoration and to some extent as investment. Wooden chests, containing stores, stand along other parts of the walls.

At the end of the room close to the entrance there is a kind of alcove containing a large, raised bedstead on which the couple owning the house sleeps. Other members of the family as well as guests spread their bedding on the floor-boards or on the window-bench.

In many of the larger houses there is a door which leads from the far end of the main room into a more or less square room, which serves the family as a private chapel, and is known as *lha-khang* (god's room). Here an altar with one or more statues of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas – most frequently of Guru Rimpoche (Padmasambhava) – stand on an altar opposite the window, and this altar, bearing the usual ritual objects, such as censers and brass cups for offerings, is often flanked by shelves containing collections of sacred scriptures. In the houses of rich men painted banners (*thanka*) hang on walls and posts, and in many of these chapels the wood panelling of the walls is covered with religious frescoes in no way inferior to the wall paintings in monasteries and village-temples.

It is characteristic of the Sherpa sense of values that men, who lead a comparatively frugal life and at many meals eat little more than potatoes in one or other form, might spend several thousand rupees on the decoration of their private chapel. At the rates current in 1957 the cost of the woodwork and the painting of a medium sized chapel was estimated at R4000, for a first-class painter such as Kapa Kalden of Khunjung would take many months to complete his part of the work, and during this time he would get a daily wage as well as all his food. In recent years, however, there has

been a decrease in the efforts and resources spent on religious enterprises, and in the villages I visited in 1971 no new chapels had been constructed in the houses of laymen and the only newly decorated chapel was in the residence of the Abbot of Tengboche.

Between the chapel and the main living-room of a big Sherpa house, there is often a small room used either as a store or as an additional bedroom. Most of the social life of a Sherpa family, however, takes place in the main room, which serves alternately as a bedroom, living-room, kitchen and workshop. Here guests are received and business deals are concluded, tailors and shoe-makers work for the house owners, and women and girls assemble to spin. On festive occasions the room is transformed into a dance-hall and the heavy floor-boards swing under the rhythmic steps of dozens of dancers. Alternatively such a large room may be used as a place of worship, when in the weeks after a death or in any other emergency numerous lamas are invited to recite sacred scriptures and perform rites in worship of Buddhist divinities.

In every village there are also several single-storeyed houses inhabited by people too poor to build a double-storeyed house or by widows and widowers content with limited accommodation. In such a house there is no spacious store or shed for domestic animals. From a small ante-room, where at a pinch a single calf or a few sheep could be accommodated, one at once enters the single living-room, arranged more or less on the same lines as a main room in a double-storeyed house. Such a single-storeyed house is a clear sign of economic stringency, and every self-respecting Sherpa endeavours to build or buy as soon as possible a double-storeyed house. Only newly arrived Khamba immigrants from Tibet content themselves with such smaller dwellings, and in a village such as Khumjung single-storeyed houses stand on the fringe of the village-site, while all the houses in the more desirable part of the village are double-storeyed.

The position is different in subsidiary villages. There most houses are single-storeyed, and in the higher *yorsa*-settlements, where timber has to be brought from long distances, all dwellings are small and consist usually of one single room, which at times must accommodate both the families of the herdsman and young calves.

The building of a Sherpa house is only partly the task of expert

craftsmen. For the shaping of house-posts, cross-beams and floor-boards, the construction of the wooden framework and the roof, and the making of window-frames, men specializing in carpentry are employed and paid daily wages. But the collection and dressing of stones, the building of the stone walls and the plastering of the walls, is done by the prospective house-owner and voluntary helpers among his kinsmen and neighbours. They assist with the house building on the understanding that they will be given similar help when their house has to be rebuilt or a married son must be provided with a home of his own. Such helpers receive no wages, but are usually offered a mid-day meal and plenty of beer.

In 1953 Phu Tare, a man of Paldorje clan from Phortse village, built a small house in Khumjung. He had come there as a servant of Khushang Thaktu, one of the richest men of Khumjung, and had married the daughter of a poor Khamba immigrant. When I arrived the couple lived in a temporary shelter, but soon afterwards Phu Tare occupied a site whose owners had died without leaving heirs, and used the stores and remaining walls of their tumbled-down dwelling to construct a house of his own. He was helped by six men and three women. Three of the men were expert craftsmen and they were paid a daily wage of  $R1\frac{1}{2}$  and given four meals a day.\* Two of them came from Phortse, and though one of the Phortse men was Phu Tare's father's brother, he received a carpenter's wage. The other helpers were all Khumjung people and they worked on the understanding that Phu Tare would assist them when they had to rebuild or repair their own houses. They did not work day after day, and helped mainly with the transport of materials and the stone-work, while the woodwork was done by the three paid carpenters who worked full-time. The actual construction was completed in a week, but Phu Tare and his wife had done much preparatory work in collecting materials.

As long as the traditional system of forest-guards was in force a villager requiring timber for building or enlarging his house could obtain the forest-guards' permission to fell the required number of trees in a specified part of the village-forest. Nowadays he has to

\* In 1971 the average wage of a craftsman was  $R7\frac{1}{2}$ , and up to  $R12$  plus food was paid to a good carpenter.

apply for permission from the district *panchayat* and his application must be in writing and recommended by the *pradhan panch*, the chairman of the village *panchayat*. This procedure necessitates in practice a journey to Salleri, the district headquarters, some three days' walk from Khumbu. A medium-sized house which a young man of Khumjung had built shortly before my visit in 1971 had cost him a sum of about R3000, even though he used some of the timber of his late father's house, which had been pulled down. Owing to the shrinkage of the village-forests, which had previously been more carefully preserved, timber has now to be brought from a greater distance, and this adds to the effort which has to be put into house-construction. There remains, however, the custom of mutual help in house-building, and kinsmen who cannot render assistance in the shape of free labour often make contributions in cash, and such payments are called *kap chang*, a term indicating that the gift was originally in the shape of beer (*chang*).

Already in 1957 large houses in Khumjung and Khunde changed hands for R4000 to 5000, but included in such a price was one medium-sized field close to the house. At that time comparable houses and plots of land in the villages of Pangboche and Thami cost only about R2000-3000, but in Namche Bazar, where there has always been a great shortage of building sites and rich traders have excellent houses, as much as R10,000 was paid for a good house. Today R3000-4000 are paid for a large field in Khumjung, but it seems that the price of houses has not risen in proportion. As in recent years there has been no sale of a big house in Khumjung or Khunde it is difficult to assess the market, for none of my informants knew of any offer for a large house in either of these villages. Considering the general rise in prices one would have thought that houses might also have greatly increased in value. However, this has not happened and one of the reasons may be that the dwindling of the trade with Tibet has deprived Sherpas of the possibility of making at a stroke large profits which could be used for the purchase of houses. I was told, however, that the cost of building a large house with a private chapel would amount to R17,000-18,000.

An entirely new phenomenon which may enhance the value of large houses is the demand for short-term accommodation by tourists. In Khunde one wealthy Sherpa in the employment of Sir

Edmund Hillary's organization has recently built an annex to his house which he lets to visitors for a small payment. Others are planning the construction of rest-houses for tourists, and it can be foreseen that in the near future simple inns will become normal features of Sherpa villages.

The houses in the summer settlements (*yersa*) are relatively cheap, and in 1971 such a house together with one small meadow could be bought for between R600 and 800, though as much as R1600 is paid for *yersa*-houses with larger holdings. As the number of Sherpas keeping herds of yak has decreased in recent years there is only a limited demand for such houses, and this fact has kept the price down.

It must not be imagined, however, that the prices paid for houses in transactions between co-villagers are entirely determined by economic factors. Ties of kinship or the obligations between friends may also be taken into consideration. Thus Ongsho Lama of Khunde sold in 1960 a small house in Khumjung to a young woman for the low price of R400 because she was related to him through her mother. He had built the house himself, but did not need it any more because he had moved to his wife's house in Khunde, and so he decided to do a good turn to a kinswoman rather than wait for a later opportunity.

There is a market in houses even in such monastic settlements as Tengboche and Devuche. Most monks and nuns own the small houses in which they live, and it is usual for a man whose son enters a monastery to build him a small house or to buy an existing dwelling empty after the owner's death or departure from the monastery.

## A Farming Economy based on Transhumance

Sherpa village economy does not allow the concentration of productive processes in a single locality. Yak-breeding necessitates continuous movements of herds and herdsmen from pasture to pasture, most craftsmen have to obtain their raw materials from distant sources of supply, and in an environment such as Khumbu even agriculture, the most sedentary of all primary occupations, involves a seasonal shifting of labour from one place to the other. The resulting system of transhumance is basically different from the pastoral nomadism of Central Asian peoples. The migrations of the Sherpas do not range over wide areas and a virtually unlimited number of potential camp-sites, but are confined to narrowly prescribed movements between a few settlements, inhabited only temporarily but permanent in so far as they constitute extensions of the landed property of individual families.

The original impetus to the dispersal of holdings over a number of settlements came undoubtedly from the herdsmen requiring solid dwellings and stores for fodder within reasonably easy reach of the various pastures grazed by their yak in the course of a year. But the advantages of settlements at different levels of altitude for the development of agriculture must soon have become apparent, and today the ownership of land in subsidiary settlements is not confined to yak-owners.

### *Agriculture at diverse levels of altitude*

For six months in the year the soil of Khumbu is normally frozen, and all agricultural operations are at a standstill. While the Sherpas of Solu and Pharak are able to grow winter crops of wheat and barley in addition to the buckwheat, maize and potatoes grown

as summer crops, the people of Khumbu must content themselves with one crop. This is sown in April and early May, and harvested during the months of September and early October. The choice of crops which can be cultivated at altitudes of well over 12,000 feet is limited. In most areas only buckwheat, potatoes, turnips and a leafy vegetable will grow, but in the high valley of Dingboche there is in addition extensive cultivation of a bearded, short-stemmed barley.

For the people of Khumjung the agricultural season begins at the end of March, or after a severe winter early in April, when the members of those households, which own fields in the lower-lying *gunsa*-settlement of Teshinga, go there to dig up the ground in preparation for the planting of potatoes. This work is done with hoes, and mainly by women, but the few fields where buckwheat is to be sown are ploughed.

Khumjung is seldom free of snow before the middle of March and there may be renewed falls as late as the middle of April. The landholder's first task is to repair the stone walls which protect individual fields against straying cattle. After the harvest breaches had been made in these walls to allow for short cuts across the fields, and these gaps are now closed. As the walls consist of rubble, with one stone loosely piled upon the other, the repairs are soon completed, and the more serious work of ploughing and hoeing can begin as soon as the ground has sufficiently thawed.

Before the planting of the potatoes can begin manure has to be carried to the fields. This consists of a mixture of fallen leaves collected in the forest during the autumn and either the droppings of cattle or human excrement. The dry leaves have formed a thick layer on the ground floor of houses where cattle are kept and at the bottom of the latrines; and in the course of the year they have got thoroughly soaked with manure. At the end of March this mixture is piled into large baskets and carried to the fields. The manure from the part of the house used as cattle-shed is handled mainly by women and occasionally by men of the household, but for the unpleasant work of emptying the latrines and carrying the leaves mixed with human excrement special labourers are hired at high wages. At the time of my stay in Khumjung in 1971 this work was done by a gang of three Khambas whom most of the householders engaged for this seasonal work, paying about R30 for the removal

of the manure from one latrine. The three men could empty the latrines of an average of three houses in a day, thus earning a total sum of R90, a wage which compares favourably even with the earnings of men on mountaineering expeditions.

The manure is dumped on the fields at regular intervals and then spread as groups of workers dig up the ground with iron hoes. This work as well as the planting of the potatoes is mainly done by women. When planting the women work in pairs; one woman holding a basket with potatoes, throws the seed potatoes in the direction of her partner, who digs up the earth with a hoe and covers the potatoes as they land at her feet. The planting occupies the women during March and April. It cannot start while the soil is still frozen hard, but should be completed as soon as possible in order to allow for the maximum period of growth before the heavy frosts of the early autumn.

Sherpas have no measures of land, but describe the size of a field by the amount of seed required. Thus on one of the largest fields of Khumjung belonging to Konje Chunbi, a former *pembu* and chairman of the village *panchayat* in 1971, sixteen loads of potatoes, each weighing about 80 lbs, are planted, and the average yield is 130-40 loads, though in a bumper year 240 loads were harvested. Sixteen people working in eight teams can complete the digging and planting in one day, while eight people are required for one day to carry the manure to the field. In 1971 there was a shortage of seed potatoes, and on the same field 10 *pathi* of buckwheat were sown. The expected yield was 12-16 *muri*.\*

In some fields a kind of white radish is grown in between the potatoes. The seed is dibbled in shallow holes made with a finger or a stick soon after the planting of potatoes. In Khumjung these radishes do not seed well, and the villagers used to bring their annual requirement of seed from Tibet, but in Phortse village, which lies on a south slope, they yield good seed.

Ploughing and the sowing of buckwheat begins in Khumjung when the planting of potatoes is well advanced. The only type of plough used by Sherpas is a light wooden plough with a narrow, iron-tipped share. As late as 1957 it was drawn either by a team of

\* *Pathi* and *muri* are measures of capacity; generally used for the measuring of grain. 1 *pathi* corresponds roughly to 1 gallon; 20 *pathi* equal 1 *muri*. 1 *muri* corresponds to 2.4 bushels.



three or four men, who use carrying bands as a harness slung across the chest, or by a pair of yak or cross-breeds between yak and oxen. It seems that ploughing with yoked animals is a comparatively recent innovation, and that until the 1930s all ploughing was done by teams of men. The reason for many Sherpas' tardiness in adopting the new method was probably the difficulty of training yak or cross-breeds to draw a plough, and the expense of keeping such animals specifically for this purpose. Ploughing, moreover, is not an extensive operation, and the average landholder could complete it within one day even with a team of men. Only the fields to be sown with buckwheat are ploughed, whereas all land intended for potato cultivation is dug over with hoes. The Sherpas maintain that ploughing, which scratches only the surface of the soil, is an inadequate preparation for the planting of potatoes and this view is probably based on experience.

While the plough, whether drawn by men or animals, is invariably led by a man, the sower walking a few steps behind and broadcasting buckwheat is always a woman. The Sherpas do not always harrow the fields after sowing, but sometimes a stout wooden pole is dragged across the field at right angles to the course of the furrow, serving thus as a primitive harrow.

Potatoes can be planted year after year in the same place and in many of the high summer settlements potatoes are indeed the only crop ever grown. But buckwheat is usually grown alternating with potatoes. On very fertile and well-manured land buckwheat is occasionally sown for two or even three consecutive years, but the yield from a second or third crop of buckwheat is never used for seed. As long as the regular rotation between buckwheat and potatoes is observed there is no need for extended periods of fallow. Unlike the land in Solu and Pharak, which normally bears two crops a year, all the fields of Khumbu invariably remain fallow throughout the winter. The planting of potatoes and the sowing of buckwheat in the fields of Khumjung are normally completed in the first half of May, and families which own land in *yorsa*-settlements set out and plant potatoes in their high-altitude plots. In the light soil of the glacial valleys this is not an arduous task, and hoeing up and planting is done as a single operation which two or three women can complete within three days.

There are great advantages in the planting of potatoes at different levels of altitude and at different items. In 1971, for instance, the potato crop of Khumjung was spoilt by excessive rain soon after planting, but in Teshinga, which lies lower than Khumjung, the potatoes had been planted earlier and matured very well. In 1972 the Teshinga potato crop was ruined by drought in the weeks following the planting, but in Khumjung potatoes planted later were very good. There was a good potato crop also in the high *yorsa*-settlements of Macherma, Lusa, Kele and Dole. Thus a crop failure at one level is often compensated by a satisfactory crop elsewhere.

Fields sown with buckwheat or potatoes have to be weeded once and preferably twice. The first weeding of the fields at Khumjung is usually completed by the end of June. The valley, which even in May looks brown and bare, is now clothed in luscious green. The fields are covered with a carpet of alternating patches of darker and lighter green. The potato plants, more than a foot high, provide the darker and the young buckwheat the lighter hue. The forest on the hill-slopes to the south is clad in luxuriant foliage, and the grass-covered slopes of Mount Khumbu-yülha are of the freshest green and studded with millions of small flowers, pink, mauve and yellow.

Many villagers weed their potato and buckwheat fields a second time in early July, but others, and particularly families with yak to take to the high pastures and limited resources in labour, omit the second weeding at least on some of their fields. From the middle of July onwards Khumjung, like other main villages, is largely deserted, and the growing crops require no more attention. To avoid the risk of cattle breaking into the fields and damaging the crops, all cattle are banished from the village, and the centre of activities shifts to the *yorsa*-settlements in the high, side valleys of the upper Dudh Kosi. There, at altitudes up to 15,000 feet, potatoes are grown in small walled-in plots, and this is the time when they require some weeding.

But during the weeks when the weather is comparatively warm and the monsoon at its height agriculture yields pride of place to animal husbandry and all cattle owners are busy tending their herds, and engage in various ritual and social activities traditionally located in the high-altitude settlements.

The lull in agricultural work is short, however, and by the middle of August the potatoes in the low-lying *gunsa*-settlements such as Teshinga, are ready to be dug up. While strenuous efforts are made to gather them in before the crops at Khumjung need to be harvested, there is the equally pressing work of cutting grass and making hay in the high *yorsa*-settlements. Labour is greatly in demand and in 1957 grass-cutters would receive a wage of R2½ per day plus food, which was two and a half times the rate then paid for agricultural labour during the time of sowing and planting.

The potato harvest in the *gunsa*-settlements ends in the first week of September, and until then there is a ban on entering the fields in the main villages. Not even the preliminary work of gathering the withered potato leaves and stalks into heaps may be begun until a day fixed by the elected village-dignitaries (*naua*). In 1957 the date announced for the formal beginning of the harvest at Khumjung and Khunde was September 6th, and a few men of Khunde who had started the work earlier were fined by the *naua*. The village now comes to life once more. The first few days are spent in clearing the fields of stalks and weeds, but as soon as all the women of the village – reinforced by a number of casual Khamba workers and even a few nuns from Devuche who have come to help their families during this rush – set to work in digging up potatoes, and the green of the standing potato-crops soon gives way to brown patches of harvested fields. There are usually one or two men in every group of harvesters, and while the women dig the potatoes, these men carry the full baskets to the owner's house. Nearly all the work of digging and gathering is done by women. Better class men do not mind carrying the baskets to their houses, but only poor men will work in a line with women.

Although later in the autumn potatoes are stored in pits dug in the fields, they are first carried into the houses and allowed to dry there. Digging up potatoes is hard work, and people labour from about 8 a.m. until dusk. But they are mostly in high spirits, and songs from many groups of women float all day long through the valley. The young girls who form many of the labour gangs will sometimes stop and dance a few minutes in the field, or they will play about, chase each other, and amuse themselves with all sorts of horseplay. In the late evening too there is singing and dancing in the houses, for the people, who for many weeks have been in their

high *yorsa*, enjoy the wider company of village-society, and regard the harvest as an occasion for jollification no less than one for hard, sustained work.

Towards the end of September, when the potato harvest in Khumjung and Khunde is nearly completed, those families which own fields at Dingboche have to move there for the reaping of the barley. The valley of Dingboche, situated at an elevation of 14,350 feet, contains a narrow elongated plain stretching along the Imja Khola, and irrigated by a small stream. It is the only locality in the whole of Khumbu where barley can be cultivated economically and, as it seems, without any need for a rotation of crops. While one or two people live permanently in Dingboche, men of Pangboche, Khumjung, Khunde and Namche Bazar, own houses there as well as irrigated fields. The barley, sown late in May or early June, ripens in the second half of September, and for a short time the otherwise deserted locality is swarming with people.

The reapers, who work in groups, do not cut the barley, but pull the plants out with their roots, and shake off the earth. Then they gather the plants, complete with ears and roots, into small bundles, twisting one of the stalks round the others. These bundles are laid out on the fields in circles, with the ears outwards, and allowed to dry in the sun. Unlike the barley and wheat of the lower regions, this barley is reaped when a good many ears are not yet fully ripe. Severe frost starts in October, and the Sherpas seem to have found that early reaping and the drying of the ears, first spread out on the fields and then in stacks, yields better results than a late harvest. In the evening the bundles have to be gathered together; they are stacked in heaps with the roots upwards, in order to protect the ears from dew or rain. The next day these stacks are once more undone and the individual bundles laid out again in order to benefit from another day's sunshine. But finally they are gathered into stacks at a place where a foundation of juniper branches has been built up between stout stakes. The bundles are placed on this foundation in such a way that alternately ears and roots face inwards and outwards. When such a stack is about 6 to 7 feet high, it is covered with a layer of grass and with mats. The barley remains stacked for one month, while the people move back to their main villages to harvest the buckwheat. But before doing so, those who have plough-animals plough the

reaped barley fields. When they return to Dingboche a month later, they thresh the barley on stone threshing floors, and then carry the grain to their villages.

There seems to be a psychological difference in the Sherpas' attitude to the harvest of grain crops and that of potatoes. While the digging up of potatoes is treated as women's work, unworthy of all but the poorest men, much of the reaping of barley is done by men, and even the richest men will work alongside hired labourers. Ang Chunbi of Kunde, for instance, one of the wealthiest and most influential men of the whole of Khumbu, and a *pembu*\* with 191 clients, moved year after year with his whole household to Dingboche, and in 1957 I saw him hard at work, spreading out bundles for drying or building one of the great stacks of reaped barley.

In the first days of October people have to be once more in their main villages, for this is the time when the buckwheat is ready to be cut and threshed. The cutting is done with sickles and though women do most of the work, it is not unusual to see a man cutting buckwheat side by side with his wife. The threshing is done at once on the fields. One or two persons, either men or women, sit on a large mat and beat the bundles of buckwheat plants, piled up beside them by the other reapers, rapidly and energetically with forked sticks about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet long. The grain is then gathered together, carried to the owner's house and dried on mats on any convenient open space.

While the harvest of the buckwheat is still in progress, most sunny days are used also for hay-making. The grass in the walled-in, privately owned meadows near the village, as well as on nearby common hill-slopes, has to be cut and dried for storage. The manner of grass-cutting is rather cumbersome; most people sit down on the ground, cut the grass around them with their sickles, and then move on a few feet. In doing this they grasp bundles of grass with their left hand, and wield the sickle with the right, cutting the grass close below the left hand. This method is not without danger, and cases of grass-cutters hurting their left hand are frequent. Another and somewhat safer method is to stand up and use the sickle like a scythe with rapid stokes.

\* The function of the *pembu*, collectors of land revenue, is described in *The Sherpas of Nepal*, pp. 117-25. For recent changes in their rôle see below, pp. 94-96.

The cut grass is lifted up in large bundles and scattered over the ground. If there is sunshine it dries rapidly, is raked together and carried home in large baskets. The grass cut on the hills cannot be left to dry there, and is carried to the village while still fresh, and dried in courtyards and on empty potato plots.

Some time during the first half of October the main villages are opened to the cattle, and those villagers who have lagged behind with their harvesting leave some of their potatoes to be dug up later rather than delay the reaping of buckwheat and the cutting of grass. For cattle do no damage to potatoes in the ground, and their harvest can be done at leisure any time before severe frost makes digging difficult.

In 1957 the first snow fell on October 17th and 18th, when some potatoes still had to be harvested. Groups of women were soon at work undaunted by the snow and cold. Another task which remained to be done was the digging up of all the land which had been under buckwheat. Strangely enough ploughs were not used for this purpose, though in 1953 I had seen a few people ploughing up their land after the harvest. This is also the time when the Sherpas dig pits in the fields next to their houses and store in them the potatoes not required for immediate use.

The last agricultural operation, which in fine weather is done early in November, is the threshing of the barley in Dingboche. Thereafter Khumbu is ice- and snow-bound until the middle or end of March, when the new agricultural season begins with the planting of potatoes in the low-lying *gunsa*-settlements.

This brief outline of the agricultural cycle of the Khumbu Sherpas does not reflect the many journeys undertaken by the individual members of a family with holdings at different levels of altitude. When the buckwheat harvest is in progress a son or a daughter may have to return to a high *yorsa* where the potatoes have only now ripened, or the women of a family which for the one or other reason have lagged behind with the planting, may have to make repeated trips to a *gunsa*-settlement, while in between they work on their neighbours' fields in the main village in order to fulfil their obligations under the arrangement for reciprocal help.

While burdening landowners and labourers with the extra effort of long treks from one settlement to the other, the system of dispersed holdings has the advantage of enabling a Sherpa family

to cultivate substantial areas by spreading out each operation over a comparably long time. The planting of potatoes, for instance, cannot be begun in Khumjung before the soil has thawed, but the weeks before that moment can be utilized for planting potatoes in the warmer and more sheltered *gunsa*-settlements. Similarly the work of harvesting is staggered in a manner made possible by the time-lag in the ripening of crops at various elevations. The result is a highly economic employment of the manpower available for agricultural work, and a level of food production which assures every inhabitant of Khumbu a more than adequate supply of basic foodstuffs throughout the year, and allowed the feeding of seasonal workers who came to Khumbu from the adjoining, climatically less favoured region of Tibet, as well as the maintenance of a considerable number of monks and nuns not directly engaged in economic pursuits.

### *Distribution of land-holdings*

The annual cycle of agricultural operations outlined in the preceding section represents the totality of the farming work of a village-community, but there are considerable variations in the amount of effort devoted by individual families to the cultivation of their land. Not all families own land in subsidiary villages, and those whose holdings are concentrated in the locality of their main domicile are free of agricultural work during times when others are busy on their fields either in *gunsa*- or *yorsa*-settlements.

In the absence of a cadastral survey it is impossible to record the holdings of individual Sherpas with any degree of accuracy. But with the help of sketch-maps showing the walled-in fields and meadows in the villages of Khumjung and Khunde combined with a list of the number of plots owned by the individual householders of these two villages at various localities I was able to establish the pattern of land-holding at least in rough outline.

In 1957 one of the 44 householders of Khunde – a recent immigrant Khamba – owned no land at all. Five householders owned fields only in Khunde, 1 had fields in Khunde and Khumjung, 12 owned fields in Khunde and 1 or more *gunsa*-settlements (mainly Teshinga), 10 had land in Khunde, Khumjung and 1 *gunsa*-settlement, and the remaining householders

had in addition to their fields in 1 or 2 main villages also holdings in Dingboche or other subsidiary settlements at high altitude. Thus out of 43 cultivators there were only 6 who never needed to switch their activities to a locality other than their main village of residence, though as a matter of fact some of them worked at times for wages on the land of wealthier people at Teshinga or Dingboche.

The position in Khumjung was somewhat different, as in this village there was a larger population of recently immigrated Khamba families, most of whom possessed no cattle and had not yet acquired any landholdings outside Khumjung. Of the Khamba householders, 5 did not possess land in Khumjung, and 46 householders owned land in Khumjung but in no other locality. Whereas 22 householders resident in Khunde also possessed fields in Khumjung, only 3 of the Khumjung families also owned land in Khunde. The reason for this difference lay in the respective location of the two settlements, Khunde being situated in the upper and narrower part of the valley, and Khumjung where it is broadest. Some of the level land within the borders of Khunde, moreover, had been covered by a landslide, and the rubble overlapping the alluvial soil made this part uncultivable. Hence there was relatively less arable land per household in Khunde than there is in Khumjung, and men resident in Khunde, unable to buy fields in their own village, used any available capital to acquire land in the adjoining part of Khumjung, where the pressure on land was not as great. Thirteen among the householders of Khumjung owned land in the main villages and in one or other of the *gunsa*-settlements, but none in the high-altitude settlements. These were mainly people who did not own many cattle, but found cultivation on two levels of altitude advantageous. Only 3 householders owned land in Khumjung and in high *yersa*-settlements without having holdings in any of the *gunsa*-settlements; 2 of these were owners of substantial herds of yak, and the third inherited the land at high altitude but did not possess the cattle to put it to economic use. Twenty-four householders, finally, owned land in the main village, in a *gunsa*-settlement and in one or more of the high-altitude settlements.

The percentage of such families involved in all stages of the



annual migrations was very much lower than it was in Khunde, where over 50 per cent of the householders possessed land on all levels of altitude, and hence participated in the full cycle of the seasonal nomadism. The presence in Khumjung of 44 Khamba households, compared to only 11 in Khunde, accounted for this difference, for only 2 of the Khambas had acquired herds of yak and were hence in need of houses and land in 1 of the settlements at high altitude.

From data compiled in 1957, it appears that with the exception of recent immigrant Khambas, most inhabitants of Khumbu owned land in localities other than the village of their main domicile. Such a dispersal of holdings would not necessarily have involved a dovetailing of the immovable property of the members of several village-communities, for every village could well have had its own subsidiary settlements where all the houses and plots of land were owned by inhabitants of the one parent village. In practice the system prevailing in 1957 was different, and the houses, fields and meadows of most of the subsidiary settlements, both *gunsas* and *yersas*, were owned by persons domiciled in a number of different main villages.

In Dingboche, for instance, 28 houses and 47 fields belonged to people of Pangboche, 12 houses and 15 fields to people of Khunde, 1 house and 1 field to a man of Khumjung, 3 houses and 8 fields to people of Milingbo, 2 houses and 4 fields to people of Namche Bazar, and 2 houses and 5 fields to the Tengboche monastery.

In Teshinga there were in 1957 25 houses belonging to Khumjung people and 16 houses belonging to men of Khunde, in Lusa 13 houses of Khumjung people, 1 of a Khunde man, and 2 of Phortse men, and in Macherma 12 houses belonging to Khumjung men and 4 houses of Phortse men.

The composition of most other *gunsas*- and *yersas*-settlements followed similar lines. It was normal for about two-thirds of the houses in such settlements to be owned by people of one main village, and the rest by people from one or more other main villages.

Ownership of houses or fields in main villages by non-residents is less frequent, although any Sherpa is free to acquire holdings

on the land of villages other than his own. In the case of adjoining twin villages such as Khumjung and Khunde, which constitute a single ritual unit and act in many respects as one village, the holdings of the residents of both settlements dovetail to a certain extent, but the only outsiders who possessed fields in Khumjung were six persons from Namche Bazar, each of whom owned one medium-sized field. One field, moreover, belonged to a nun of Devuche, whose home-village was Khumjung. In Pangboche land was owned by two men of Namche Bazar and two men of Khunde, but in Phortse there were no holdings of non-residents.

Purchase of land in a main village other than the buyer's own is rare, but such land may come to a person through inheritance or as part of a dowry. For the purpose of cultivation holdings in distant villages are of little value, but a yak-owner may use such holdings as a staging-camp in his seasonal migrations. Thus Pangboche, though a 'main village' for its permanent residents, serves men of Namche Bazar and Khunde as a subsidiary settlement. They halt there with their herds when moving to some of the high pastures in the valleys above Pangboche, and grow some potatoes to be used as provisions during their stay there and in the higher *yorsa*-settlements.

In regard to land-holdings there is a clear division, however, between the group of villages consisting of Khumjung, Khunde, Pangboche and Phortse on the one hand, and the villages in the valley of the Bhote Kosi on the other. These two groups have their separate grazing areas, and the members of either do not own land in the villages of the other. Only Namche Bazar occupies an intermediate position and its inhabitants have economic interests in both groups.

### *Organization of agricultural work*

The greater part of the Sherpas' agricultural work is done by teams of men or women. Only in exceptional cases will individuals work singly or by twos, one of the exceptions being a man with a team of yak cross-breeds ploughing up the ground after the harvest or a ploughman drawing furrows ahead of his wife who walks behind and sows the buckwheat. But when planting, weeding and

harvesting potatoes, or when harvesting buckwheat and barley, Sherpas prefer to work in groups ranging between four and twelve individuals. The members of such groups cooperate either on a reciprocal basis, or they are hired labourers working for wages in cash or kind.

Families of modest economic status rely for their agricultural work mainly on mutual assistance. Growing children are organized in labour-gangs known as *ngalok*. Young boys of a *ngalok* go out together to collect firewood, and girls begin early to cooperate in weeding and the harvesting of potatoes. Much of this work is done by *ngalok* of adult but unmarried girls, each gang working in turn on the fields of its members. Married women retain some of these *ngalok* connections, but though mutual help is still being given the closeness of *ngalok* ties diminishes with the increasing age of the members. Unlike the labour-gangs of such tribes as the Apa Tanis of the Assam Himalayas,\* which in the manner of their operation resemble the Sherpas' *ngalok*, the latter are not permanent groups to which a person belongs all his or her life, but are formed temporarily for one agricultural season or even one single phase in the agricultural operations.

A concrete example may show how a man of modest means but respectable social status organizes his farm work. In 1957 Dorje Tikbi of Khumjung, whose household consisted of himself and his wife, and two daughters, owned 3 fields in Khumjung, 1 field in Sosho, a *gunsa*-settlement near Teshinga, 4 small fields in Chule, 5 small fields in Garsoso, and 1 field in Dole. His livestock comprised 1 cow, 1 calf and 17 sheep.

All the planting of potatoes was done by the members of the family, with the help of *ngalok* partners, whose labour had to be repaid in kind. The weeding was done by the members of the family alone, but for the harvest in Khumjung Dorje Tikbi's daughter joined with five other young women and one young boy in a *ngalok*, and this team completed most of the work on Dorje Tikbi's farm, who in addition employed paid labour to the moderate extent of ten men days, paying in wages a total of ten measures potatoes each worth about R2. The potatoes in his fields in the *gunsa*-settlement of Sosho were harvested by his brother,

\* cf. my *Himalayan Barbary*, London 1955, pp. 55, 56; and *The Apa Tanis and their Neighbours*, London 1962, pp. 43, 44.

who at that time happened to be staying in the vicinity. The yield amounted only to two loads of potatoes, and Dorje Tikbi paid his brother a small fee in kind. The harvest in Dole, a low *yorsa*-settlement, was done by the members of the household. The total expenditure on hired labour throughout the year was thus of a value of not more than R25.

A very different picture is presented by the expenditure on agricultural labour incurred in 1956 by Dorje Ngungdu of Khumjung, who owned considerably more land than Dorje Tikbi without ranking among the rich men of the village.

The work on his 4 fields in Khumjung, 2 of which were large (A, D) and 2 small (B, C), was organized as follows:

- A Digging: Wife and daughter, and 12 women, each paid R1, worked for 1 day.
- B Digging: Wife and daughter worked for 1 day.
- B Planting potatoes: Wife and daughter worked for 1 day.
- A Ploughing and sowing buckwheat: Wife sowing; 1 man leading the plough, 3 men pulling the plough, each paid R2, worked for 1 day.
- C Digging and planting potatoes: Wife and daughter worked for 1 day.
- D Digging: Wife and daughter, and 12 women, each paid R1 per day, worked for 3 days.
- D Planting potatoes: Wife and daughter, and 8 women, each paid R1 per day, worked for 2 days.
- D 1st weeding: Wife worked for 3 days, 14 women, each paid R $\frac{3}{4}$ , worked for 1 day.
- D 2nd weeding: Wife and 7 women, each paid R $\frac{3}{4}$ , worked for 1 day.
- A 1st weeding: 5 women, each paid R $\frac{3}{4}$ , worked for 1 day.
- A 2nd weeding: 3 women, each paid R $\frac{3}{4}$  worked, for 1 day.

All other fields

weeded once only: Wife worked for 4 days.

Work on 6 fields in Teshinga involved:

Digging: Wife worked for 3 days, 8 women, each paid R1, worked for 1 day.

Planting potatoes:	10 women, each paid R1, worked for 1 day.
Sowing buckwheat: (without ploughing)	Wife worked for 1 day.
1st weeding:	Worked for 2 days, 5 women, each paid R $\frac{3}{4}$ , worked for 1 day.
2nd weeding:	Wife worked for 4 days, but could not finish the work.
Work on 2 fields in Macherma involved:	
Planting potatoes:	Wife worked for 3 days, 2 women, each paid R1, worked for 1 day.
Weeding:	Wife worked for 3 days, brother's daughter worked without wages for 2 days.

At the time of harvest Dorje Ngungdu employed a corresponding amount of paid labour, and a rough estimate of his annual expenditure on wages came to R250-300. The sale of yak calves as well as the sale of agricultural produce surplus to his own needs, enabled him to bear this expenditure.

The annual consumption of his own household with seven members was on an average as follows:

75 loads of potatoes (approximately 6,000 lbs)  
4 *muri* of buckwheat  
4 *muri* of barley, wheat, maize, millet  
1 *muri* of rice

The quantity of potatoes required for domestic consumption included those used for feeding paid labourers and those used for distilling *rakshi*. Some of the grain, all of which except buckwheat has to be bought from areas of lower altitude, was also used for the distillation of liquor and for the brewing of beer.

The considerable demand for agricultural labour on the part of men owning more land than they can cultivate with domestic resources was met mainly by the many recent immigrant Khambas.\* These people depended largely on the food and the wages they obtained from men whose land could bear a yield in excess of the owners' requirements. The control the members of the old

\* The position of Khambas, immigrants from Tibet, is described in detail in *The Sherpas of Nepal*, pp. 28-34.

Sherpa families exercised over such land, enabled them to maintain a standard such as the new immigrants could attain only by success in trade, not by the cultivation of the marginal land with which they, as poorer newcomers, had to content themselves.

Though agricultural employment was obviously not unlimited and a Sherpa village could feed only a certain number of landless Khambas throughout the year, there were peak periods when the demand for labour exceeded supply, and landowners competed for the available labour. This occurred usually during the late summer when the harvest of potatoes at settlements of various altitudes, haymaking and the reaping of buckwheat all made heavy demands on the labour resources of a village. At such periods labourers were able to dictate the form of payment, and their preference for payment in butter sometimes caused a temporary shortage of this important commodity. Labourers engaged for the day are fed by the employer. They are given a meal at his house when reporting for work at about 8 a.m., and a mid-day meal in the fields, which may either be brought from the house, or cooked in the open. In the evening the workers return to the employer's house and are given another meal. This applies to friends and neighbours coming to work in fulfilment of *ngalok* obligations as much as to hired labourers. Once work has begun labourers are entitled to their full wages for the day even if bad weather brings it to a stop. Digging over the fields or harvesting potatoes is done even in slight rain, but for the harvesting of buckwheat and haymaking the weather must be fine, and many an employer of hired labour is hesitant to start such work in doubtful weather. If he informs the workers early in the morning that their services will not be required, he is not liable to pay any wages for the day, while the abandonment of work after one or two hours involves him in considerable loss. The cancellation of an engagement on account of bad weather does not mean that the labourers will have to be idle. They may find other work not dependent on fine weather, or engage in spinning or weaving which can be done indoors.

Relations between employers and hired workers are usually very amicable, and no dispute over wages or conditions of work has ever come to my notice. The friendly spirit which characterizes the relations of *ngalok* members also pervades the groups of hired labourers working in the fields, and no distinction is made between

those working on a basis of reciprocity and those in receipt of wages.

### *Changes in agricultural processes between 1953 and 1971*

Of all the facets of Sherpa economy agriculture has been least subject to change. The only significant development in the method of tillage is the greatly increased use of draught animals yoked to the plough. In the village of Khumjung, for instance, there were in 1953 only two households which used a plough drawn by male cross-breeds between yak and oxen, and this use of animal traction was then a relatively recent invention. By 1957 the number of owners of plough-animals had risen to four, and in 1971 the use of the animal-drawn plough had become widespread and those who did not own trained cross-breeds hired animals and often also ploughmen. While in 1957 much of the ploughing was still done by teams of three or four men, such men-drawn ploughs have now become obsolete.

Those fields on which buckwheat or barley is to be sown are ploughed, but potato plots are dug over with iron hoes, and this work as well as the planting has always been done mainly by women. The carrying of manure to the fields, not less than the work of digging and planting, makes heavy demands on the labour force of a household, and in 1971 these demands could not be met as easily as they were in 1957. Before the Chinese closed the Tibetan border numerous Tibetan seasonal workers came to Khumbu, and even Sherpas of average means were able to hire extra hands for the work of ploughing, digging and planting. Now the main source of seasonal labour has dried up, and Sherpas have to exert themselves greatly to complete the preparation of the fields and the planting of potatoes in time. In 1957 it was not unusual to see groups of up to twelve women working in a line, the wife of the owner supervising the work rather than labouring herself. All this has changed. The wives of some of the most prominent men of Khumbu can be seen working on the fields from dawn to dusk, and even men of good status help with the digging and the carrying of manure, a job still considered with some distaste.

## 42. *A Farming Economy based on Transhumance*

The shortage of labour is not only due to the absence of seasonal workers. As long as there was an open frontier between Nepal and Tibet, many Tibetans, described by the Sherpas by the generic term Khamba, came to Khumbu and stayed for some years or settled for good. During the period of adjustment, when they had not yet acquired land of their own, they provided readily available casual labour, and wealthy land-holders relied very much on such Khamba workers. Nowadays, however, the number of immigrant Tibetans depending for their subsistence entirely on daily wages has dwindled. Many of those who arrived before or immediately after the Chinese occupation of Tibet, have acquired some land or are engaged in activities more profitable than agricultural labour. As this pool of labour is not being replenished by new arrivals, Sherpas have to do without large numbers of casual labourers, and this situation affects not only agriculture but, as we shall see presently, also some other branches of the economy.

The rate for agricultural labour in 1957 was R $\frac{3}{4}$ -1 for women, and R2 for men drawing a plough, plus all meals. In 1971 it was R2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -3 for women and more for men, though men were then seldom available. This compares with daily rates of between R8-10 which in 1971 Khumjung people could earn by working for contractors building a hotel on a hill above the village, and the normal rate of R10 paid by tourists for porters. Hence it is not surprising that there was a scarcity of agricultural labour and the wealthier women of Khumbu had much less leisure than they used to enjoy. By 1972 agricultural wages had caught up with those paid by contractors (see p. 91), but as in that year I did not visit Khumbu I had no opportunity to observe the effect of this development on the labour market.

A very bad potato harvest in 1970 was partly attributed to delays in planting and this was almost certainly due to the greatly stretched labour force of such villages as Khumjung. Most families try to continue cultivating their plots in the low-lying *gunsas*-settlements, but some of the potato plots in the high *yersas*-settlements have been abandoned because there are not sufficient hands to make their cultivation practicable, and the contraction of yak-breeding, to be discussed presently, diminishes the need for stores of potatoes in the summer settlements inhabited by herdsmen.

In 1971 potatoes were in short supply and the price rose to



about R8 per 4 gallon tin, the usual measure, which compares to about R1 for the same quantity in 1957. This came about even though Sherpas have become accustomed to eating much more rice than they used to do. Their cash earnings enable them to purchase substantial quantities of rice which Rais and other cultivators from the middle-ranges bring to the weekly market at Namche Bazar.

## *Animal Husbandry*

While agriculture has always provided the Sherpas with the bulk of their food supply, the breeding of yak and other cattle adds much-needed protein to their diet, and until recently it also allowed them to engage in a profitable trade. Traditionally ownership of yak is moreover a source of prestige. As late as 1957 a herd of yak was considered one of the most important status symbols, and the care of cattle was considered a manly and honourable occupation. Rich men, who would never put their hand to a hoe or a sickle, unhesitatingly underwent a good deal of hardship when they took their herds to the high pastures and spent weeks and months in the discomfort of primitive *yorsa*-dwellings. To own a herd of yak was the aim of many a socially ambitious man, and several of the Sherpas who had worked as high-altitude porters for mountaineering expeditions invested their savings in yak.

Notwithstanding the high prestige value of yak-breeding and its place in ritual, which is unparalleled by any comparable significance of agriculture, it would be misleading to think of the Sherpas foremost as a pastoral people. Whereas every Sherpa family engages to some extent in agriculture, yak-breeding was always only one of several economic choices, and there were wealthy men who preferred to apply their energy to trade rather than to animal husbandry. Some idea of the place of yak-breeding in the traditional economy of the Khumbu region can be gained from a cattle census which I compiled in 1957. It is accurate as far as Khumjung, Khunde, Phortse, Pangboche and Namche Bazar are concerned, but slight errors may have crept into the figures for the cattle owned by the people of the Thamichok area. To make the census understandable, we must anticipate briefly the description of the various types of domestic animals bred by Sherpas.

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Yak (*bos grunniens*) is the long-haired bovine typical of Tibetan and other highlands of Central Asia. The Sherpas refer only to the males as *yak*, while they call the females *nak*, a term differing from the Tibetan term *dri* for female yak. Yak can be crossed with other cattle such as the Tibetan cattle (*bos aunus typicus*), the bulls of which the Sherpas call *lang* while Nepali speakers refer to them as *khirkoo* bulls. The resulting male cross-breeds are known in Sherpa as *zopkiok* and the female cross-breeds as *zum*, the Tibetan terms being *dzo-po* and *dzo-mo*. Cattle of the type occurring in the lower regions of Nepal and in India (i.e. *bos indicus*) are described here simply as ordinary bulls and cows.

In 1957 there were in Khumbu among a total number of 596 householders 187 owners of yak and cross-breeds as well as 67 owners of cows. The total number of cattle was 2,894 while the human population of Khumbu was 2,205. The detailed figures of the cattle census are given in the table below:

Village	Cattle-owners	male yak	female yak	male cross-breed	female cross-breed	lang	cows	Total
Khumjung	33	14	333	24	15	13	56	488
Khunde	28	2	316	35	2	17	16	416
Tengboche*	1	—	23	4	2	1	—	31
Milingbo	5	2	20	—	3	—	8	38
Pangboche	33	2	228	7	2	3	12	287
Phortse	36	16	454	—	—	8	17	531
Namche Bazar	28	—	40	238	50	1	48	405
Jaro	3	1	25	—	—	—	4	33
Thamichok area	91	2	647	79	27	27	72	945
	258	39	2086	387	101	70	233	3174

\* All the cattle of Tengboche belong nominally to the abbot of the monastery.

The figures of this table reflect significant differences in the cattle economy of the various villages. The greatest number of male and female yak owned by the inhabitants of a single village — Thamichok being an area consisting of several villages — was found in Phortse, a village of only 59 households. The people of Phortse concentrated on yak breeding more than those of any other village, and engaged very little in trade. Namche Bazar, on the other hand, had, despite its greater wealth, only 40 female yak, but 238 male cross-breeds. Some of these were kept as pack animals, but the

majority, though in the possession of people of Namche Bazar at the time of the census, were intended for export to Tibet. Among the 33 cattle-owners of Khumjung there were only 17 men who owned herds of yak while 16 owned only ordinary cows, and the corresponding figures in Khunde were 26 and 2. Thus only 17 out of the 108 householders of Khumjung were fully involved in the type of cattle-economy which necessitates seasonal migrations to the higher pastures and the ownership of houses and meadows in widely dispersed localities. Those owning cows only found adequate grazing fairly close to the main village, and their movements ranged over a much smaller area. It is possible for a family engaged mainly in agriculture to keep a few cows without having to acquire holdings in *yorsa*-settlements. Such cows are based mainly on the village, and only during the time when there are standing crops and all cattle are banished from the village, will some members of the family take them to a nearby camp with some *resa* shelters, where the cows can graze outside the prohibited zone. The keeping of cows carries neither the prestige of yak-ownership nor does it necessitate the adoption of the semi-nomadic life led by those who tend a herd of yak. In some cases it may be the first step to the ownership of a mixed herd, but there are many men who lack the ambition to breed yak, but find it nevertheless convenient to keep a few cows or female cross-breeds as a domestic source of milk.

The Sherpas' cattle economy used to be determined by the fact that most breeders aimed not only at the maintenance or gradual increase of their herds, but that livestock was bred mainly for the sake of the profits resulting from the sale of calves. These profits were highest in the case of cross-breeds, and Khumbu, where yak and ordinary cattle thrive equally well, was in a favourable position to cater for the demand for cross-breeds which existed both in Solu and in Tibet. As the male cross-breeds are infertile, the breeders must maintain a stock of pure yak as well as of ordinary cattle, and arrange for the controlled mating of male yak and cows, or female yak and *khirkoo* bulls. To achieve such mating is much more difficult than to allow yak to mate spontaneously. Indeed Sherpas say that female yak do not like to mate with bulls, and have to be tied up when they are to be covered. Apart from the cross-breeds resulting from the mating of pure yak and cow, or bull, there is also

the issue of female cross-breeds – which are fertile – mated with either yak or bull. The following list gives the Sherpa terms for the various types of cross-breeds:

*lang* + *nak* = *dimzi* (male: *zopkiok dimzi*)

(female: *zum dimzi*)

*yak* + cow = *urang* (male: *zopkiok urang*)

(female: *zum urang-ma*)

*yak* + *zum* = *tolmu* (male and female)

*lang* + *zum* = male: *tol*

female: *pakhim*

*lang* + *tolmu* = *yir*

*lang* + *yir* = *ik*

*lang* + *ik* = *gar*

If the female offspring of *zum* and bull are again and again crossed with true bulls after several generations they produce fertile males, and these can be used for breeding purposes. But it is said to happen occasionally that a bull is bought as a true bull, then found to be infertile owing to an admixture of yak blood undetected by the purchaser.

Cross-breeds are valued because they combine certain desirable qualities of pure yak and pure oxen. They are hardier and more sure-footed than pure oxen, and can stand the climate of Tibet nearly as well as yak. Female cross-breeds give more milk than female yak, and male cross-breeds are more useful as pack-animals than pure yak; because unlike the latter they do not suffer from the lower altitude and warmer climate of areas such as Solu, but are nevertheless capable of carrying loads across passes of 18,000 feet.

The cross-breeds of *dimzi*-type are far more numerous in Khumbu than those of *urang*-type, for Sherpas of the highest region find it more convenient to keep a herd of many female yak and one bull rather than a herd of cows, which, being more delicate, cannot at all times of the year be left night and day in the open. Though great care is taken to control the mating, some crosses occur which are not desired. The least profitable are those between ordinary bull and *tolmu*, for the male offspring are neither fertile nor hardy enough to be useful as pack-animals, and the female, though fertile, do not fetch good prices. Control of mating also insures, as far as

possible, the birth of calves in April and May, when their chances of survival and healthy growth are best. By October such calves are old enough for sale and separation from their mothers.

Yak are usually castrated when they are two or three years old, and most of the breeding is done with two-year-old yak. If left uncastrated after that age they tend to become dangerous and their horns grow to a great length. In 1957 there was a famous yak belonging to a man of Namche, who had left him uncastrated although he was six years old. He had become semi-wild, and went his own way from October until the beginning of the mating season in June, when he went from one herd to the other and mated with whatever female yak were on heat. At that time it was sometimes possible to lasso and shear him but otherwise he was of little economic use to his owner.

Castration is performed not only on yak, but also on male cross-breeds which, though infertile, are not impotent and tend to become unmanageable if left entire. Anyone may perform the operation, but the Sherpas believe that those who castrate animals inevitably commit a sin, just as it is sinful to deprive yak of their hair by shearing, or the calves of their mother's milk by milking female yak.

The composition and growth of herds can best be demonstrated by examples, and the following figures relate to the herds of two men of Khumjung.

Dorje Ngungdu owned in 1957 eight female yak and one bull; one of the yak was 21 years old, one 8 years old, three were 6 years old, one was 5 years old, and two were 4 years old. The bull was 3 years old, and was soon afterwards killed by a leopard. In 1955 four female cross-breed calves and two male cross-breed calves were born and were all sold; in 1956 three calves (one yak, one female cross-breed and one male cross-breed) were born and sold. In 1957 four calves were born, but three died and only one female cross-breed calf survived.

Aila, one of the richest men of the village, and a very careful breeder, owned 1 male yak, 25 female yak, 2 male cross-breeds, 2 female cross-breeds, and 1 bull. Of the female yak seven were 10-11 years old, eleven 7-8 years old, and seven 3-4 years old. The number of calves born and sold were:

- in 1955 4 female cross-breeds, 6 female yak, 2 male yak born; and 4 cross-breeds sold;
- in 1956 6 female cross-breeds, 1 male cross-breed, 2 female yak born; and 7 female cross-breeds and 1 male cross-breed sold;
- in 1957 4 female cross-breeds, 4 male cross-breeds, 2 male yak, 3 female yak born; and 3 female cross-breeds and 2 male cross-breeds sold; 3 calves died.

These figures are fairly typical of the smaller and the larger type of herd, and it is apparent that in both cases cross-breeds were quickly disposed of. The heavy death rate in 1957 was due to an unusually hard and long winter, a winter during which some less careful cattle-owners lost half of their stock through starvation.

In the rearing of calves a difference is made between those of female yak and those of female cross-breeds. The former are the more valuable and hence are allowed all their mother's milk for the first month, and at least half of the milk during the second and third months. Female cross-breeds on the other hand, are milked even during the first month after giving birth, for their calves are less valuable. Male calves (*tolmu*) particularly are of little value, and are slaughtered in the months of November and December. The useful life of a female yak is about eighteen to twenty years, during which time she gives birth to about fourteen to sixteen calves.

### *The economic use of cattle*

While the sale of cross-breed calves results in the greatest return for the labour involved in keeping a herd of yak, the cash earned in this way is by no means the only profit a Sherpa derives from the ownership of cattle. Indeed it is likely that long before there was a trade in cross-breeds, Sherpas depended on animal husbandry for a substantial part of their subsistence.

Milk products play an important role in Sherpa diet. Fresh milk is not drunk in large quantities, except perhaps by lonely herdsman having little else to eat, but curd is a highly valued food, and the butter-milk remaining after the churning of butter

is regularly drunk. Most of the milk is used for butter making, and in this respect there is no difference between the thick, creamy milk of yak and the milk of cross-breeds and ordinary cows. Butter is never made from fresh milk, but the milk is first boiled, and then put into a pot with a little addition of old curd, and covered with a cloth. By the next day fermentation has set in and the resulting curd is poured into a churner and some hot water is added. It is then churned with a wooden churner which is vigorously pushed up and down, but not twirled. When the butter has formed into lumps, it is taken out of the butter-milk, cleaned in water and then stored in leather bags, or nowadays sometimes in kerosene tins.

The remaining butter-milk is either drunk or boiled until it becomes solid and forms a kind of dry cheese known as *sherkam*. This is either eaten fresh or kept in a leather bag for later use. Some people break the *sherkam* into small pieces and dry these on mats in the sun. The pieces become very hard and can be preserved almost indefinitely. This hard substance is called *churbi* and is carried on journeys, when it is chewed and gradually dissolved in the mouth.

Another and much more valuable preserve made of milk is *korani*, milk dehydrated by slow boiling till it assumes the consistency of toffee. A great deal of milk is required to produce a small quantity of *korani* and only in the houses of rich cattle-owners is a little occasionally made as a luxury food.

The main effort of all cattle-owners is directed towards the production of butter. Great quantities of butter are needed for domestic as well as for ritual use. Butter is eaten with or as part of all the more highly valued food, it is used as fuel in the butter-lamps lit in the course of Buddhist ceremonies, and is moulded into various shapes for the decoration of sacrificial dough figures (*torma*). Butter is used also as a medium for the payment of wages, and once formed an important article of trade eagerly sought on the Tibetan market. In Khumbu there is seldom a surplus of butter, however, and most of the butter which was exported to Tibet across the Nangpa La came from Solu, where the pastures remain free of snow during most of the winter, and there is less emphasis on the rearing of calves.

In Khumbu a female yak yields only about 15 lbs of butter a year, because the milk production of yak is low and limited to about five months in a year. Cross-breeds produce on an average two litres of milk a day, and in Khumbu the yield of butter per animal is about 20-25 lbs, while the Solu Sherpas reckon with a yield of about 40-45 lbs of butter. In Solu many calves of cross-breeds are deliberately starved and allowed to die, because their value is small and cattle-owners want to utilize the mothers' entire yield of milk. Sherpas resort to the device of starving calves because as Buddhists they are averse to killing out-right, and in Solu there are no butchers of *hyawo*\* class.

The second major produce of yak is their hair. Yak are shorn once a year, usually in June or July. Sherpas have no shears or clippers, and the scissors used by some tailors are never employed for shearing yak or sheep. The usual method of shearing yak is to seize a bundle of hair with the left hand and cut it with a razor-like knife. The fine wool, on the other hand, is plucked, and at the time of the year when the yak naturally lose their winter coat it comes out quite easily. Cross-breeds do not have long hair and are not shorn. Both the long, coarse hair of yak and the soft wool are used for weaving blankets. The former makes more durable blankets, and these sell for much higher prices than the blankets made of the soft wool. Ropes used for tethering cattle and for tying up and fastening loads to pack-saddles are also made from the coarse, longer hair of yak. About once in two or three years the hair of a yak's tail is also cut. A herd of about thirty yak yields annually enough hair for about two superior blankets and one of inferior quality. Only the fine, soft wool of young yak up to two or three years old, is used for weaving material for making clothes.

Though Sherpas are not supposed to kill any animal, they freely eat the meat of animals which are killed accidentally or slaughtered by others. Professional butchers (*hyawo*) used to come once a year from Tibet, and there were also some living in Namche Bazar. In 1971 I heard that others had settled in Thami, and it thus seems that people of Khumbu depend no longer on butchers coming for short periods from Tibet. In the month of November when the

\* The lowest class of Tibetan society, from which butchers are recruited, is called *yawa* or *pang-bo*; *hyawo* is the Sherpa term for members of this class.



pastures dry up, and the feeding of the cattle with hay has begun, yak between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one are slaughtered, and the meat partly eaten fresh, and partly hung up under the roof where during the cold of the winter it keeps for a long time. But if an animal has to be killed or dies in the summer the meat is cut into strips and smoked over a fire. The skin of yak is treated with salt and then softened with butter, and is finally used as leather for the soles of boots. Many yak are killed by wolves and leopards, and whatever meat can be recovered is eaten. Sherpas have no prejudice against the eating of such meat and they are altogether rather insensitive to the smell of high meat.

There are two ways of distributing the meat of a slaughtered or accidentally killed animal. If a yak has been killed by a wild animal or has fallen to its death, the owner usually spreads the news that he has meat to sell, and neighbours and friends then buy some pieces for cash. But if an old yak, cow or sheep is to be slaughtered the owner is more likely to sell the whole animal to a *hyawo*, who does the slaughtering and then hawks the meat making a profit by selling individual cuts. As long as there was an open frontier between Tibet and Nepal some *hyawo* even brought dried meat from Tibet and sold it to the Sherpas.

Another type of food provided by yak is their blood, which on occasions is drawn from the living animal. Sherpas maintain that they bleed their yak not so much for the sake of their blood, but in order to improve the animals' health or to cure barrenness. The operation is comparatively simple, though skill and a steady hand are required. The animal is first fettered and tied by its horns to a tree or post. A rope is then fastened tightly round the animal's neck, and the operator pierces the artery with a sharp, iron instrument resembling a small skewer. The blood streaming out is caught in a wooden or iron bowl, and as much as about two pints of blood may be drawn. As soon as the instrument is pulled out the small wound closes automatically, and the animal, appearing to be none the worse for the ordeal, is released and rejoins the herd. The blood is then mixed with salt and a little water, and left to stand until it solidifies. It is then cut into pieces and either fried or boiled. Alternatively it may be mixed with *tsampa* before it solidifies, and then baked on a heated stone slab like buckwheat bread.

Besides contributing milk, meat and blood to the Sherpas' diet,

and providing hair and wool for blankets, yak served as the principle means of transport in the trade with Tibet, and are still used as pack-animals in the seasonal migrations between main villages and subsidiary settlements. Both male and female yak as well as male cross-breeds are used for carrying loads, and the normal weight worn by any of these animals is two bags each weighing between 50 and 60 lbs. They are easy to handle and two men were sufficient to take a pack-train of ten or twelve animals on a trip across the Nangpa La. Yak and cross-breeds are also yoked to the plough, but for this work they have to be trained and the number of men who own plough-animals is limited.

### *Seasonal migrations*

Periodic movements from pasture to pasture are an essential element of the Sherpas' cattle economy. Their extent and range, however, varies with the size of herds. The owner of a small herd may base his yak for five months in the year on the main village, move with his animals to higher pastures for another five months and spend perhaps two months at one or two *gunsa*-settlements. A man owning thirty or more yak, on the other hand, may keep them only one month out of twelve in the main village, and take them even during part of the winter to some high *yorsa*-settlements.

This system can be demonstrated by tracing the annual movements of the herds of two men of Khumjung: Dorje Ngungdu, who in 1957 owned 8 female yak and 1 bull, and Ang Tandin, who owned 2 male and 32 female yak, 1 female cross-breed and 1 bull.

Dorje Ngungdu kept his cattle in Khumjung from November until March, and during that time the animals grazed as long as possible on the surrounding slopes, and from December onwards were fed on hay and the dried stalks of buckwheat stored in Khumjung. In April his son took the herd to Chermalung, a site near some caves half-way between Teshinga and Lapharma. Dorje Ngungdu had a store of hay in Lapharma, which was then still under snow, and he hired men to carry some of this hay to Chermalung to supplement the meagre food found on the pastures which had only just emerged from the grip of winter. In

May the yak were driven to Lapharma, where there was even less grazing, but where they were fed on the hay stored in Dorje's house. By the beginning of June new grass sprouted on the pastures near Khumjung and Dorje's herd, like those of other villagers, was brought down and kept at various *resa*-camps above Teshinga and Khumjung.

In July, however, all cattle had to leave the hill-slopes close to the area of cultivation, and part of Dorje's family moved with the yak to their *yersa*-settlement at Lapharma, where by that time the pastures were covered by a carpet of luscious grass and flowers. After a few weeks herdsmen and herd moved further up to the settlement of Macherma. There Dorje Ngungdu and five other families celebrated the *Yer-chang* rite, which is designed to ensure the well-being of the herds. (c.f. *The Sherpas of Nepal*, pp. 208-210.) During the first part of September the yak remained at Macherma, and the grass on the walled-in meadows was cut and dried. When the hay had been safely stored, the herd was driven down to Lapharma and haymaking began there.

Two members of the family stayed with the yak at Lapharma until the middle of October. By that time the harvest in Teshinga had been completed and the cattle could be moved down to this *gunsa*-settlement. In its vicinity there was still ample grazing and when, at the end of October, Khumjung was reopened to the cattle, Dorje brought his yak back to the village, kept them at night in a harvested field next to his house and during the day let them graze on the hill-slopes above the village.

The annual migrations followed by the herd of Ang Tandin ranged over a much wider area and the time during which the thirty-eight animals of this herd could be kept in Khumjung was comparatively short. At the end of October, when all the harvested fields of Khumjung were thrown open to the cattle, this herd too was brought to the village. After less than a month, however, the herd was moved to a camp on the slopes above Teshinga and in December it was driven further down into the Dudh Kosi valley to a place where Ang Tandin owned a cave and had accumulated a store of hay. At the end of February this was exhausted and the herd was moved to Tonbo, a single-house settlement on the way to Lapharma, where there was also a store of fodder. Already in April the herdsmen moved further up to

Lusa to feed the yak on the hay accumulated there, and May was spent partly in Macherma and partly in Phangar, a settlement close to the upper end of the Dudh Kosi valley. In June the herd was driven to Gokyo, a *yersa*-settlement at an altitude of over 15,000 feet on the shores of a glacial lake, and there it spent a whole month, partly feeding on a store of hay and partly on the new grass. In July Ang Tandin's son brought the herd down to Lapharma and in August the whole family assembled in Phangar for the celebration of the *Yer-chang*. From there the herd once more moved down to Lapharma where it spent most of September and in October it was taken first to a settlement near Teshinga and then for one week to the village of Phortse, where Ang Tandin owned a house and some fields. From there, herdsmen and herd moved to Khumjung for the year's only extended stay in the main village.

A calendar based on these and other grazing cycles appears roughly as follows:

- October/November: herdsmen and herds come to the main village, grazing on nearby slopes and harvested fields.
- November/December: small herds remain in main village; large herds stay at low-lying camps or settlements at a small distance from the main village. Feeding with hay and buckwheat stalks begins.
- December/January: as above; substantial feeding with hay and buckwheat stalks.
- January/February: as above; feeding on hay and buckwheat stalks continues.
- February/March: small herds remain near the main village; large herds are driven to high *yersa*-settlements, though these are still under snow; the yak are fed on the hay stored there.
- March/April: small and large herds are kept at high *yersa*-settlements and fed on hay.
- April/May: all herds are taken to pastures of medium altitude.

May/June:	large herds move to high pastures; some small herds are brought for a short time to the vicinity of the main village.
June/July:	general move of all cattle to the high pastures.
July/August:	all cattle remain at pastures of high altitudes.
August/September:	return of all herds to pastures of medium altitude.
September/October:	cattle remain at pastures of medium altitude.

We see from this calendar that large herds can be kept in and near the main villages for not more than about four months in the year, while for small herds this period can be extended to about five and a half months. Thus, for the greater part of the year, herdsmen have to live at considerable distances from the villages where they have their large and comfortable houses. In many cases the tending of a yak herd is taken in turn by the owner and his grown-up son, or perhaps by two brothers living in a polyandrous marriage. But there are families where one man spends most of his time with the yak, and during the greater part of the year pays only brief visits to his home in the main village. The discomfort such men experience is mitigated by reasonably well-built houses in the various *yorsa*-settlements where they live for many weeks not only in the pleasant weather of the summer months, but often even in the intense cold of February and early March.

The difficulty and strenuousness of this life of frequent movement from one *yorsa* to the other induces many an elderly man, lacking young sons to take his place with the herds, to sell his yak and to manage either without cattle or have only a couple of cows or female *dzo*, which can be kept in the village all through the winter and entrusted to a herdsman friend for the time when all cattle are to be driven to the high pastures.

It is not unlikely that the decision to change the emphasis of a family's economy from cattle-breeding to agriculture is made more easily now than before the introduction of the potato had enhanced the potential productivity of the land near the main villages.

### *Changes in animal husbandry*

Whereas the agricultural activities of the Sherpas have undergone only minor changes resulting mainly from the shortage of labour, the pattern of animal husbandry and its rôle in Sherpa economy has altered very considerably. In the past breeders aimed not only at the maintenance or gradual increase of their herds, but relied also on the profits resulting from the sale of calves. These profits were highest in the case of cross-breeds, for Khumbu, where yak and ordinary cattle thrive equally well, was in a favourable position to cater for the demand for cross-breeds which existed in Solu, in Tibet and in such regions of Western Nepal as Manangbhot and Mustang.

As long as there was an open frontier between Nepal and Tibet trade in cattle occupied a central role in the business of Sherpa merchants. This trade was based on the import of young female yak from Tibet, and the sale of Khumbu-born cross-breeds to Tibetans, who did not themselves produce such cross-breeds, but valued the males for the sake of their carrying capacity and the females on account of their high milk yield. The number of males exported every year via the Nangpa La, the pass leading from Namche Bazar to Tingri in Tibet, was about 600, and the number of female yak imported by the same route only slightly less. In 1957 the price obtained for a male cross-breed in Tibet was about R300 while a female yak could be bought in Tibet for R120 and sometimes even less. The Sherpas of Khumbu not only sold cross-breeds to Tibet, but also to the Sherpas of the Solu region and to Bhotias in such distant parts of Western Nepal as Manangbhot, Mustang and Thak Khola. They took them there via Tibet, avoiding thereby the trek through the middle-ranges of Nepal where the environment and climate are unsuitable for yak and even cross-breeds.

Nowadays this cattle trade has been strangled by the restrictions imposed by the Chinese rulers of Tibet. The export of female yak from Tibet is forbidden and the Chinese rarely permit Sherpas to sell male cross-breeds. Moreover, the Chinese do not allow the transit of men and cattle from Khumbu to the Sherpas' old markets in Western Nepal. For all these reasons the breeding of

cattle for sale has become less profitable and this is reflected in a change in the size and composition of herds kept by the people of Khumbu.

In 1957 there were in the village of Khumjung 33 cattle-owners and the total cattle population of the village consisted of 14 yak bulls, 333 female yak, 24 male cross-breeds, 15 female cross-breeds, 13 *kirkoo* bulls and 56 cows. The corresponding figures in 1971 were 32 yak bulls, 194 female yak, 39 male cross-breeds, 98 female cross-breeds, 13 *kirkoo* bulls, 40 cows. The great reduction in the number of female yak is explained by the fact that no more female yak are imported from Tibet, and that Sherpas prefer to produce cross-breeds. The number of female cross-breeds has dramatically risen from 15 to 98. The reason for this increase is the fact that several families have given up the keeping of yak which have to be taken to the high pastures and are more difficult to herd, and instead keep cross-breeds mainly as a source of milk. These can be kept in the village for the greater part of the year. The increase in the number of male cross-breeds may be partly due to their growing use for ploughing. I have no ready explanation for the increase in the number of yak-bulls, but it may be that the presence of larger numbers of Hindu government employees in Namche Bazar is inhibiting the slaughter of yak, a practice frowned upon by the Nepalese government because, for religious purposes, yak are classed with cows and cow slaughter is forbidden in Nepal.

Several Sherpas who used to own herds of yak told me that they had switched to the keeping of cross-breeds because they lacked the men to look after the yak in the high pastures. Herdsmen, who as late as 1957 could be hired for an annual wage of R120 plus food and clothes, are now difficult to obtain. Previously the unmarried sons of yak-owners took a share in the herding, but the increasing involvement of many younger Sherpas in mountaineering and tourism deprives their families of their services as herdsmen. Those men who have given up cattle-breeding are no longer in need of the houses and meadows in summer settlements and while some were able to find purchasers for their holdings, others are leaving their houses and potato plots unused. On the other hand, the owners of cross-breeds still use meadows in the nearer *yorsa*-settlements. They

cut the grass and carry the dried hay on their backs or on pack-animals to their main village. Hay is sold for 1 rupee per 6 lbs and at times the price of 2 lbs of hay may even rise to  $\frac{1}{2}$  rupee. A load of hay Sherpas can carry weighs about 80 lbs. In the absence of other fodder, a milch cross-breed has to be given at least 4 lbs. of hay a day. Cattle also eat the stalks of buckwheat and these are cheap, costing only R2 per load.

The comparative figures for the cattle owned in 1957 and 1971 indicate only a moderate move away from the breeding of yak but the actual trend is probably even stronger. For many of the present yak owners are conservative elderly men, while very few of the younger householders are interested in the breeding of yak. Hence the number of yak owned by Khumbu people may decrease even further in the foreseeable future. In Phortse, a village which had never been heavily engaged in trade but depended mainly on agriculture and pastoralism, the number of female yak has dropped from 454 in 1957 to 240 in 1971, while the number of male yak has risen from 39 in 1957 to 109 in 1971. Significantly Phortse people owned no cross-breeds at all in 1957 and even in 1971 there were only 5 male and 7 female cross-breeds there. As the number of households in Phortse is less than two-thirds of the number of households in Khumjung, a total of 392 cattle compared to 377 in Khumjung indicates that in this very conservative village cattle-breeding has retained much of its traditional importance. Moreover, in Phortse no large-scale switch from yak-breeding to the keeping of cross-breeds as milch animals has taken place, and cattle owners continue to spend part of the year with their herds in the high *yorsa*-settlements.

The development of animal husbandry in the Thamichok area suggests that the villages of that region conform to the pattern of Phortse rather than that of Khumbu. In the period from 1957 to 1971 the number of yak bulls rose from 2 to 46, while the number of female yak dropped from 647 to 618. Female cross-breeds increased from 27 in 1957 to 32 and male cross-breeds were increased spectacularly from 79 to 140. The number of *khirkoo* bulls remained fairly steady with 30 compared to 27 in 1957 but that of cows increased from 72 to 123. The overall picture is of a cattle economy which has held its own within the general framework of Sherpa economics with a slight trend towards the keeping



of cross-breeds and cows. The total number of cattle owners in Thamichok increased from 91 to 117 but this rise may partly be explained by the fact that the 1971 figures comprise the owners of sheep and goats, animals not included in any census of 1957.\* At that time very few Sherpas owned sheep or goats and their importance for the economy of Khumbu was negligible. But by 1971 many Sherpas had built-up substantial flocks. The Sherpas of the Thamichok area alone owned 530 sheep and 236 goats and the number of sheep and goats in Khunde was 59, in Khumjung 234 and in Pangboche 115, while in Phortse there were 139 sheep and 15 goats. There are several reasons for this growing interest in the breeding of sheep and goats. As long as there was unrestricted trade with Tibet, Sherpas could buy as much wool as they liked and they also used to purchase dried mutton from Tibetans. At present Tibetan wool is difficult to obtain and the trade in dried meat has virtually ceased. Moreover, the Nepalese government encourages the breeding of sheep and several Sherpas received loans which enabled them to build up small flocks. Unlike the Bhotias in such areas as Thak Khola, Mustang, Dolpo and Humla, the Sherpas do not use sheep and goats for the carrying of salt and grain, but breed them only for the sake of their wool and flesh. Environmental factors provide a ready explanation for this difference between Western and Eastern Nepal. The route over the Nangpa La to Tibet is too high and too difficult for laden sheep and goats and the narrow paths through the rain forests in the Dudh Kosi gorges do not lend themselves to the transport of grain or salt by flocks of animals requiring grazing along the track.

\* For the 1971 figures for the Thamichok area I am indebted to Mr. David R. Barker, whom I met in Khumjung in April 1971 and who kindly collected these data in the course of his fieldwork among the Sherpas of Thamichok.

## *Trade, Crafts and Tourism*

The Sherpas' favourable position as middlemen in the trade between Tibet and the lower-lying regions of Nepal enabled them to attain a standard of living far above that of most other Nepalese hill people, and in particular that of their southern neighbours, the purely agricultural Rais. Though the latter dwell in country of milder climate and richer soil, they possess none of the luxury goods found in many of the more prosperous Sherpa houses and have nothing to match the cultural achievements of the inhabitants of the cold, windswept highlands of Khumbu. It was the trade with Tibet which gave the Sherpas the chance of acquiring valuable jewellery, clothing, household goods and ritual objects of Tibetan and Chinese origin, while the many journeys connected with this trade kept them in touch with the aesthetic and intellectual interests of their Tibetan neighbours.

The trade-route which traditionally linked the rich agricultural land of the Dudh Kosi basin with the Tibetan province of Tingri leads through Khumbu, and the Sherpas of Khumbu had virtually a monopoly on the movements of goods from Namche Bazar across the Nangpa La to Kyabruk, the first Tibetan village, and to Tingri itself. The origin of this monopoly lies probably in the fact that only people normally living at altitudes over 12,000 feet can endure the hardship of carrying loads along a track across extensive glaciers and a pass well over 18,000 feet. For the lightly clad Rais of the middle-ranges this would have been an impossibility, and they never penetrated further north than Namche Bazar, or at the most Khumjung. The Khumbu Sherpas' monopoly was confirmed by a government order, which ruled that Sherpas of Solu were not allowed to trade direct with Tibet, except for the purchase of necessities for their own use. Thus they were allowed to go to Tibet and carry a single load of salt across the Nangpa La, but not to hire porters or pack animals and import goods for resale. There

are no salt deposits in Nepal, and salt has always been one of the main imports from Tibet.

Even though Khumbu was far from the centre of government and until the end of Rana rule in 1951 the Sherpas enjoyed a great measure of *de facto* autonomy, the trade with Tibet formed the subject of a number of government orders and decisions embodied in documents, copies of which are still in the possession of individual Sherpas. Thus a document of 1828 issued in the name of King Rajendra Bir Bikram Shaha Deva and addressed to Mizar Gordza, one of the Sherpa headmen, laid down rules for the trade centred on Namche Bazar. According to these rules there was a time of the year, November–May, when Sherpas could trade wherever they liked, while from June to October, the main season for the trade with Tibet, no one was allowed to trade outside Namche Bazar and the *gembu*, a Sherpa official whose function I have described in *The Sherpas of Nepal* (pp. 117–19), had authority to control the trading. The same document contains the provision that those coming to Namche Bazar from the lower regions, a category of traders described as *dhakre* (basket-carriers), (in practice mainly Rais) should trade only in the presence of the *gembu* and an official known as *duare*, and that no other agents or middlemen were permitted to act.

The fact that violations of these trading rules aroused active opposition on the part of the Sherpas of Khumbu can be deduced from a document issued in 1885. This document contains a decision of the Commander-in-Chief, General Jitsang Bahadur Rana, in favour of the people of Khumbu who had complained against a breach of the trading rules allegedly committed by Tsiring Ngunduk Ganbar Misar and five other men.

The regulations controlling trading operations in Khumbu also restricted the activities of Tibetan traders. These were allowed to bring their goods as far as Namche Bazar but there they had to sell them to Sherpa merchants. It is unlikely that this rule was resented by Tibetans. Up to Namche Bazar they could travel with pack animals, but the paths and bridges in the Dudh Kosi gorges were unsuitable for laden yak and neither Tibetans nor their animals were used to the relatively warm climate of the country below Namche Bazar.

The Sherpas of Solu, on the other hand, were irked by the

restrictions on their trade with Tibet and they repeatedly tried to get them abolished. In this attempt they failed, but three important families of Solu contrived to circumvent the rules by acquiring houses in Namche Bazar and entering into marriage alliances with Khumbu Sherpas. Thereby they qualified as residents of Khumbu and this meant that they could trade freely with Tibet. Others went into partnership with traders of Namche Bazar and in this way acquired a share in the profitable Tibetan trade.

This trade, which contributed so much to the property of the Sherpas, was never static but underwent various changes determined by the law of demand and supply. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries large quantities of raw iron produced in the small Nepalese mining town of Thosé were carried through Solu and Khumbu and sold in the border settlement of Kyabruk or in Tingri. Both Solu and Khumbu Sherpas were involved in this trade. Traders of Solu brought the iron as far as Namche Bazar employing Tamangs and Solu Sherpas as porters. The iron was in the shape of balls or made up as plough shares such as were in demand in Tibet. In Namche Bazar, Khumbu merchants bought the raw iron, paying about  $\text{Rs } 1\frac{1}{2}$  for a quantity weighing 5 lbs. They then employed Khumbu men to carry the iron across the Nangpa La as far as Kyabruk paying a wage of  $\text{Rs } 2\frac{1}{2}$  for a load of approximately 50 lbs. Usually they sold the iron at Kyabruk and Tibetan traders transported it by yak or cross-breeds to Tingri. This trade in iron came to an end when the construction of a motorable road linking Gangtok and Kalimpong with the plains of Bengal opened the Tibetan market to cheap Indian iron with which the Nepalese produce, transported along a far more difficult route, could not compete for long. Some elderly Sherpas of Khumbu remember that as young men they still earned wages by carrying loads of iron across the Nangpa La, but the trade finally came to an end around the late 1930s.

When the trade in Nepalese iron declined, the trade in Tibetan salt was still at its height and many of the fortunes of the great mercantile families of Namche Bazar were made through the import of salt and its resale throughout the lower regions of Nepal. Though in the years after the Second World War the cheaper Indian salt was finding its way further and further into the hills of Nepal, Tibetan salt was until recently one of the two principal

commodities which the Sherpas brought from Tibet, the other being raw wool. Both were needed in Khumbu for home consumption as well as for resale and as Khumbu produced little for which there was a demand in Tibet, the Khumbu Sherpas had to go far afield to obtain the goods which they tendered in exchange for Tibetan salt and wool. Foremost among these ranked various kinds of grain which the Sherpas brought from the Rai country and exchanged at a favourable rate for salt in Kyabruk or Tingri. Other commodities regularly exported to Tibet were dyes such as madder, clarified butter, dried potatoes, unrefined sugar, incense, handmade paper, buffalo hides and cotton cloth. Imports from Tibet included tea, tobacco, sheepskins, furs, dried meat, woollen cloth, carpets, clothes, hats and boots, Chinese silks, silver ornaments, porcelain cups, hand-printed books and various ritual objects. Apart from the trade in these goods there was also a regular exchange of cattle, involving Khumbu, Solu and Tibet and great sums of money were invested in such transactions.

All trade with Tibet was confined to two seasons: the early summer (May and June) when the track across the Nangpa La becomes passable after the heavy snow of the winter, and the uncertain weather of the monsoon has not yet begun, and the autumn (October and November) when there are usually dry, clear days and the Nangpa La has not yet been blocked by the onset of winter weather. Journeys during the monsoon are possible, but men and beasts with loads find the crossing of the glacier difficult and there is always the danger of snowstorms.

The district of Tingri and particularly the market town of Gangar, served as an entrepôt from which goods imported from Nepal were distributed to many parts of Western and Central Tibet including such cities as Lhasa and Shigatse. The merchants of Gangar had a virtual monopoly on all trade leaving Tingri for Lhasa, and even administrators, military officers and some artisans were involved in this long-distance commerce. Because of their links to other centres of population and their position within the Tibetan political system the former were well placed to control the flow of goods through Tingri.

\* For information on the economy of Tingri (also spelt Dingri) I am indebted to Dr. Barbara Aziz, who recently made a study of Tibetan refugees from Tingri now settled in Nepal.

In an analysis of Sherpa trade as it existed until the closing of the Tibetan border in 1959, we have to distinguish between the big merchants who developed trading as their primary occupation, and the men who devoted most of their time to farming, but undertook two or three trading expeditions a year. For the latter, trading was principally a means of securing commodities for their own consumption, though they always expected to make some profit by a resale of part of their purchases. Many of the transactions of these occasional traders were on a barter basis, but sometimes Nepali currency was used to purchase wool or salt in Tibet. The big traders used currency to a greater extent and dealt not only in Nepali rupees but also in Indian and Chinese currency notes and coins. Previous to the events of 1959 all three currencies were accepted by traders in the frontier regions of Tibet.

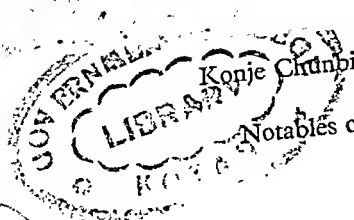
Most households of such villages as Khumjung, Khunde or Thami arranged for at least one trading expedition to Tibet and two or three to the grain producing areas south of Pharak. Either the householder himself or one of his sons would undertake these trips and even young girls joined their fathers and brothers on trading journeys across the Nangpa La. Much of this small-scale trade was done without the use of pack animals and Sherpas carried loads of up to 80 lbs of salt or wool.

A man who had bought rice in the Rai country and carried it across the Nangpa La could exchange it at the border village of Kyabruk at a rate of 4 measures of rice for 7 measures of salt, while at Tingri the rate fluctuated between 9 and 10 measures of salt for 4 measures of grain. If he then took the salt to the rice producing areas near Dingla or Aisyalukharka he could exchange 1 measure of salt for 3 measures of rice. Thus, a Sherpa bartering 10 measures of salt for 4 measures of rice in Tingri could obtain for these 10 measures of salt 30 measures of rice if he sold them at Dingla. The gross profit was thus 26 measures of rice, but the effort involved in such a transaction was one trip to Tibet of at least ten days' duration and another trip to Dingla which took at least eight or even ten days. For anyone who had to hire porters such trade would not have been profitable, but the average Khumbu householder did not enter his own time into his calculations and covered his need for salt and grain by such transactions.

Maize and millet were also used in this barter trade and a



Sherpa men drinking liquor out of silver cups



Konje Chunbi of Khumjung with his wife, daughter  
(in nun's dress) and son  
Notables of Khumjung during a temple ritual



Sherpa taking salt to the Rai villages in the area between Kharikhola and the Hongu valley got for 1 measure of salt, 3 to 4 of maize or millet at Kharikhola and 5 to 6 of such grain in the more distant villages near Lokhim. An even higher rate could be obtained by those prepared to sell the salt on credit and to collect the grain after the harvest. In that case 8 measures of grain would be given for 1 of salt. Maize was usually ground to flour in the water mills of Khumbu before it was carried to Tibet, where 1 measure of maize flour was worth 2 of salt.

Another commodity often taken to Tibet by small traders was madder (*tso*) which grows in warmer regions such as Kharikhola to the south of Pharak. It used to fetch, in Tibet, about three times its price in Khumbu and was sometimes bartered for wool. According to the fluctuations of demand and supply, 1 to 2 lbs of wool were given for 2 lbs of madder.

Unrefined sugar, which the Sherpas brought from lowland Nepal or India, could be exchanged for an equal weight of wool. When in May the first Khumbu Sherpas arrived in Tingri they were soon surrounded by Tibetans who asked them to exchange sugar for wool. Even children brought small quantities of wool, often stolen from their parents, and bartered them for sugar. Nearly all the sugar was of the unrefined type, known in India as *ghur*; at that time only small quantities of refined sugar reached Khumbu and were available for re-export to Tibet.

Yet another article of export, which mainly small traders took to Tibet, was dried potatoes. Soon after the potato harvest the Sherpas of Khumbu would boil potatoes, peel them, cut them into slices and dry these on mats in the sun. These dehydrated potatoes were then carried to Tibet and exchanged for salt. The rate fluctuated between  $2\frac{1}{4}$  and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  measures of salt for 1 of dried potatoes.

The Sherpas of Khumbu also dried white radishes (*mulla*) but these were not taken to Tibet, where radishes can be grown, but to the Rai country, and were there bartered for an equal measure of maize or millet.

The manner in which an ordinary householder of modest means used to meet his needs for imported commodities by minor trade deals of this type may be demonstrated by the case of Dorje Tikbi (Mende) of Khumjung. Once a year Dorje

Tikbi went to Kuradam in the Terai and there he sold two or three dogs which he had bred himself. Normally he got Indian Rs 20 for each dog. He also took with him *kurki*, a medicinal root used as a febrifuge, which during the monsoon he collected in the high hills. In December 1956 Dorje Tikbi went to Kuradam with his wife, his son and his daughter and each of them carried one load of *kurki*. Each load fetched Nepali Rs 60 and with this money they bought some cotton clothes for themselves, as well as unrefined sugar, some sugar candy and a load of madder. Moreover, they spent Rs 30 on food and incidentals on the way, for they combined this trading trip with a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya. As soon as the Nangpa La became passable in April 1957, Dorje Tikbi's son took the load of madder and some of the money to Tingri and exchanged the madder for half its weight in wool and bought one woollen blanket. After his return, father and son did two trips to Kharikhola and there sold the woollen blanket as well as a homemade yak-hair mat and bought maize and millet for their own use. In May, Dorje Tikbi's son made another journey to Tibet. This time he took the unrefined sugar and some money with him and bought a load of salt, partly for domestic use and partly for sale. In June he went to Jorsale, a village of Pharak only a few hours walk from Namche Bazar and bartered the surplus salt for grain.

Through these trade deals, which involved neither the use of pack animals nor the hire of porters, the members of Dorje Tikbi's household were able to meet their needs for Tibetan salt and wool and obtained a year's supply of maize and millet. This family did not own sufficient land to be able to sell potatoes or buckwheat, and its livestock consisted, in 1957, of only 1 cow, 1 calf and 17 sheep. But, while unable to produce by farming an appreciable marketable surplus, the members of the family invested their labour in a number of small-scale trade deals and gained thereby adequate quantities of those commodities of which a Sherpa household has a definite need.

Another example of the type of trading carried on by those for whom commerce was only a side line in a basically agricultural economy, were the trade deals of Dorje Ngungdu (Thaktu) of Khumjung. Dorje Ngungdu was wealthier than Dorje Tikbi and could start the season's trading with some cash which he had

obtained by selling calves from his small herd of yak. In November 1956 his son went with two pack animals to Tibet, carrying other traders' loads for wages and brought back two loads of salt for which he had paid cash. As it was late in the season and there was already much snow, the trip to Tingri and back took him nearly one month. In January 1957 Dorje, accompanied by his son and unmarried daughter, went to Chainpur, more than a week's journey south of Khumjung, taking with him R300 in cash and some woollen cloth for sale. With the cash and the price from the cloth he bought chillies and lacquer which is used for dyeing. This trip took over five weeks. On his return Dorje Ngungdu sold the chillies to a man of Khumjung, who needed them to pay the lamas engaged in the mortuary rites for his wife, and made also a profit on the lacquer. In March Dorje and his children set out again and this time went to a Gurung village near Aisyalukharka, carrying cash and one yak-hair mat. They bought 48 *pathi* (approximately 384 lbs) of unhusked rice and arranged to have it husked. They carried 28 *pathi* back to Khumjung and Dorje Ngungdu and his son started almost at once on a second trip and returned with the remaining 20 *pathi*. The first trip, when they had to negotiate for rice, took twenty-one days and the second trip only thirteen days.

In April Dorje Ngungdu and his son and daughter went once again to the Rai country. They carried a wool blanket, a yak-hair mat, salt and R50 in cash, which had been obtained by selling salt brought from Tingri. They sold their wares in Wopse, in the lower Dudh Kosi valley and bought 60 *pathi* of maize and 7 *pathi* of small millet. Returning, the three of them carried 30 *pathi* to Khumjung and the two men did two more trips to fetch the remaining 37 *pathi* of grain.

In June Dorje Ngungdu's son went to Kyabrak in Tibet to barter grain for salt, and then did a trip to a Sherpa village near Kharikhola, where he fetched wheat obtained in exchange for woollen apron material which his father had left there on commission on a previous journey. The woollen material as well as the yak-hair blanket sold in the course of these transactions had been woven in Dorje Ngungdu's house by a hired Khamba woman, but the wool and yak-hair had been spun by members of the household.

Normally a modest household such as that of Dorje Ngungdu would not have required as much rice as he bought in 1957, but in that year he acted as one of the organizers (*lawwa*) of the Dumje festival and therefore required extra quantities of rice and other grain.

*The transactions we have so far discussed were those of ordinary farmers who engaged only occasionally in trade, though even they had to be prepared to go on journeys of over a month's duration. On quite a different level lay the trading operations of the bigger merchants, who derive most of their income from commerce and put little or perhaps even none, of their energy into farming. Particularly in Namche Bazar there were several big traders who depended entirely on the profits from their extensive business operations.*

Traders of this type did not engage much in the type of barter which met the needs of the ordinary farmer and husbandman. Most of their transactions involved payment in money, or were at least calculated in money, though delivery of goods sometimes replaced cash payments. Some of the richer merchants owned houses in Tingri and spent part of the year there. These trade contacts extended as far as Shigatse, Kalimpong and Calcutta, while connections with Kathmandu were at that time rather slight.

Since the end of the iron-trade and the decrease in the amount of Tibetan salt absorbed by the Nepalese market, the trade in cattle described above (pp. 56-57) assumed a central role in the business of Sherpa merchants. A few examples may illustrate the trends of this cattle-trade as it existed until the Chinese occupation of Tibet brought it to a virtual standstill.

In the summer of 1957, Pasang Putr (Shangup) of Namche and Pemba (Thaktu) of Khumjung bought 38 male cross-breeds from Solu Sherpas on credit and sold them in Tibet for an average of R300 each. For some of them they received young female yak valued at R120 each, and for the rest they were paid cash. With this money they bought woollen cloth in Tibet and female cross-breed calves in Phortse and Pangboche, and these they gave to the Solu Sherpas in payment for the male cross-breeds. In the same year Da Chiri (Khamba), one of the richest traders of Namche Bazar, bought 130 male cross-breeds from Solu, paying

R250 per head. The previous year the price had been R400 but those who had bought at that rate and tried to sell such expensive cross-breeds in Tibet lost heavily. Hence the price had dropped.

In April 1957 Pasang (Thaktu) of Namche Bazar, took 30 male cross-breeds as well as Nepalese handmade paper and raw material for making incense, to Tibet. He sold the animals in Tingri and then went on to Shigatse where he sold the paper and incense. With the money he received he went to Kalimpong and there bought beads and tins of vegetable cooking fat. These goods he took to Shigatse and sold them there. He then bought carpets, tea, incense and gold ornaments and returned with his purchases to Namche Bazar. In addition to these trade goods he bought a whole load of silver coins with him. The expedition had been successful and he had made a great profit. But the trade in cattle has always been fraught with risk. Some years previously, Urken, a trader of Namche Bazar, had taken 140 male cross-breeds to Tibet and 120 of them had died on the way from an epidemic. The same man once lost 24 out of 40 cross-breeds in an untimely snow-storm.

Yet, the Sherpa traders of Namche Bazar were not easily daunted, and undertook very long journeys to find buyers for their cattle. Thus, Pasang Putr, who left Namche at the end of October 1957 with 36 male cross-breeds, took 16 of the animals as far as Tonje in Manangbhot, having travelled via Tingri and Jongkha Dzong, and re-entered Nepal across the Larkya Himal. At Tonje he sold his cross-breeds for cash and *zhi* beads. I happened to see Pasang Putr leave Namche Bazar in October and in the following January I met his sister 250 miles further west, three days' journey south of Tonje where she had parted from her brother. This incident demonstrated how very far flung the business contacts of the Sherpa traders were. Khumbu men would take cross-breeds born in Khumbu but raised in Solu over stretches of hundreds of miles by way of Tibet to Manangbhot and there sold their animals to Bhotias of Western Nepal. We shall see that similarly Bhotias of Thak Khola used to buy yak cross-breeds in Solu and drive them via Khumbu, Tibet and Mustang to their villages in the vicinity of Muktinath.

While the most spectacular profits would seem to have been

derived from the cattle-trade, the merchants of Namche Bazar and some of the richer men of other Khumbu villages also engaged regularly in the export of other goods to Tibet. Of great importance among these was butter, which, packed in kerosene tins, was sold both unprocessed and clarified as *ghi*. In 1957 such a 4 gallon tin of clarified butter cost R120 in Khumbu, but was sold in Tingri for R200 and in Shigatse for as much as R400. Most of the butter and *ghi* exported to Tibet came from Solu, for the butter produced in Khumbu was almost entirely required for local consumption. In Khumbu and Solu fresh butter was about one-fifth cheaper than *ghi*, but in Tibet there was little difference between the price of each.

Another commodity then regularly exported to Tibet was paper made by hand from the fibres of a daphne shrub. The nearest centre of manufacture was in the area of the Hongu valley, where 100 sheets could be bought for about R2. In Namche Bazar the price was about R3, and in Tibet 100 sheets could be sold for R6. A porter's load of paper contains about 2,000 sheets and by using pack animals for the stretch from Namche Bazar to Tibet, the cost of transport could be reduced and the exporters made substantial profits.

Hides too were exported in considerable quantities. Sherpa traders collected buffalo hides in the Rai country, where one hide could be bought for as little as R5 to 8. The price a hide fetched in Tibet was several times higher and 1 load of hides could be exchanged for 3 loads of salt. Apart from these main items of trade, professional merchants sold a great variety of goods to Tibet, many of which had to be obtained from India. Thus, they bought cheap cotton cloth, unrefined sugar, kerosene, aluminium pots and vessels, matches and cigarettes in the bazaars of the Terai, transported them by porters as far as Namche and from there by yak caravan to the markets of Tibet.

The flow of goods in the reverse direction was by no means confined to salt and wool. Sherpa traders obtained in Tibet tea, tobacco, furs, woollen fabrics, carpets and a number of luxury goods, such as beads, porcelain cups, silver cup stands and a variety of ornaments. The tea was sold in bricks, costing between R20 and R30 and reached Tingri via Lhasa. The tobacco bought in Tingri was Indian tobacco which came from Kalimpong via Shigatse.

Transport over this route was cheaper than transport on man's back from India through Nepal to Namche Bazar, because on the former route animal transport could be used all the way.

Some of the traders of Namche Bazar engaged also in the horse-trade, buying Tibetan ponies in Tingri and selling them in the Terai. Ponies, however, could not be taken across the glaciers of the Nangpa La and had to be imported by the longer route along the Rongshar river. In normal years the Khumbu traders bought only a few ponies, but in 1953 a Sherpa of Namche bought eighty Tibetan ponies and had them taken to the Terai. But because so many came on the market at one time, the price dropped and his profit was small.

Although most of the Khumbu traders had direct business contacts with merchants in India, a good deal of the trade with India was in the hands of middlemen from Solu. These Solu traders were more favourably placed for trade with the lowlands, and it was they, rather than the Khumbu traders, who maintained regular contact with the Nepal valley. Thus clarified butter from Solu was sold not only to Tibet, but also to traders in Kathmandu, and there were certain articles which the Solu Sherpas obtained exclusively from the Nepal valley. Most important among these were copper and brass vessels of all types and other metal objects, manufactured by Newar craftsmen. Many of the ritual objects used by lamas were also obtained from Kathmandu and Patan, and not, as one might think, from Tibet. Cotton cloth and cotton yarn as well as chemical dyes were bought in Kathmandu as well as in the Nepalese and Indian Terai.

The trade of the big merchants of Khumbu and Solu required an elaborate organization, long-standing personal contacts in Tibet and India, and great personal enterprise. Many trade deals involved long-term credit, and personal prestige and trustworthiness were often the only security offered. The system of ceremonial friends (*thowwu*) is designed to provide the traders with reliable business partners in distant areas, and even small traders conclude such friendship pacts with Tibetans no less than with Rais or members of other Nepalese communities (see p. 296). Kinship ties play a part too in forging trade contacts and there are several Sherpas who have relatives in Tingri, Shigatse and Lhasa.

Some of the traders of Namche Bazar were very wealthy by

Nepalese standards, and the example of the man who lost more than R30,000 worth of animals in one trading expedition, without getting into serious financial difficulties, was symptomatic of the considerable reserves at their disposal. Their standard of living was high in the sense that their houses were well built and richly furnished, that they could employ painters to decorate private chapels, and that they and their wives owned expensive jewels and clothes. But their day-to-day life was simple and though they consumed a great deal of good Tibetan tea, they were not extravagant in their diet and when on journeys they led as hardy and frugal a life as any other Sherpa, sleeping in the open and crossing the high passes and glaciers on foot. At feasts and marriages they mixed freely with the less affluent members of the community, and though the wealthy were respected, they were neither treated with deference nor granted special privileges.

No trader was ever secure against reverses. The owner of a great deal of land had little to fear, but the trader in an economy such as that of the Sherpas had to invest his capital again and again in new trade deals, and in the absence of great warehouses or open shops, his goods were always on the move and often dispersed over wide areas. To maintain his contacts he had often to sell on credit, and if he was ever short of ready money he had to borrow at an interest rate of 25 per cent per annum. Shortage of cash used to be an almost chronic ill of the economy of Khumbu and in 1957 I was often embarrassed by being approached for short-term loans, not, admittedly by any of the big traders of Namche, but by some of the richest men of Khumjung who wanted to profit from sudden opportunities for a favourable trade deal, but lacked the hard cash to invest in the venture.

In the absence of statistics, which for obvious reasons I could not obtain, it was impossible to assess the share of trade in the income of the Sherpas of Khumbu with any degree of accuracy. In attempting a rough estimate we have to take into account that at least two-thirds of the population of Namche Bazar, which numbered 296 in 1957, lived almost exclusively on income from trade and these two-thirds amounted to nearly 10 per cent of the total population of Khumbu. In other villages too there were men who devoted the greater part of their energy to trade, and the above examples of the trade deals of husbandmen of average means



show that these men and their sons spent two to three months on journeys connected with their small-scale trade. The only two villages whose inhabitants did not engage in trade to any significant extent were Phortse and Pangboche. The people of these villages concentrated mainly on cattle-breeding and with the cash obtained from the sale of calves they obtained Tibetan salt and wool from small traders of Khumjung and Khunde.

Considering all these factors, one may venture the estimate that up to 1959 external trade, i.e. trade with areas outside Khumbu, accounted for between one-third and one-fourth of the Sherpas' total income from all branches of their economy.

### *Changes in the pattern of trade*

The situation as it existed up to 1959 has radically changed as a result of the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the consequent disruption of the traditional trade relations. When I visited Khumbu in 1971 I found a complete reorientation of the economy. The trade with Tibet, though not completely paralysed, had lost its role as one of the main pillars of the Sherpas' economic life, and new activities, largely connected with a growing tourist traffic, had taken its place.

Subsequent to the flight of the Dalai Lama and the exodus of large numbers of Tibetan refugees in 1959, the Nepal-Tibet frontier was for a time completely closed, but later the Chinese authorities allowed a limited trade in a few basic commodities such as salt, grain and wool. Nepalese traders can obtain visas for entry into Tibet from the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu but such visas are valid only for the official trade-route through Kodari-Kuti and not for the route across the Nangpa La, and the Sherpas say that the machinery for obtaining such visas is in any case too cumbersome for their purposes. However, the Chinese permit Sherpas to cross the frontier and go as far as Tingri without visas. The frontier settlement of Kyabruk, where previously much of the barter trade occurred, does not exist any more, but in Tingri there is one house in which Sherpa traders can stay. The Sherpas may deal only with Chinese officials, who have to employ Tibetan interpreters, and they are not allowed to trade with Tibetans. There are also some restrictions on trade imposed by the Nepalese authorities. Sherpas

exporting grain and *ghi* to Tibet are supposed to obtain permits from the office of the assistant commissioner at Namche Bazar, but in 1971 very few such permits were issued, and it seems that much of the small-scale border trade eluded the control of the local authorities.

Sherpas complained that the Chinese in charge of the trade depot in Tingri were unpredictable and varied at will the rate at which salt is being bartered for rice and other grain. Sometimes they give the Sherpas 4 measures of salt for 1 measure of rice, but at other times the rate of exchange is much less favourable. Normally, only small quantities of wool are sold to Sherpas in exchange for grain, but occasionally the Chinese are prepared to accept cross-breeds in payment for wool, 1 load of wool being exchanged for 1 male cross-breed. Sherpas say that the prospects of being able to dispose of animals taken to Tingri are so uncertain that nowadays very few cross-breeds are exported to Tibet. As the Chinese do not permit the export of female yak, the trade in cattle, which previously played so great a rôle in the Sherpas' trade with the Tibetans, has been greatly reduced. Apart from salt and wool Sherpas now obtained in Tingri some animal fat, mainly of yak and sheep, some textiles, including Chinese silk, made-up clothes and boots. In exchange they give rice, other grain, butter, hides and dyes. Paper, which used to constitute an important item of export, is no longer sold in Tibet.

The volume of this trade is so small that most of the commodities imported from Tibet are required to meet the needs of the people of Khumbu and only small quantities are available for resale to Rais and other people of the middle-ranges. Occasionally Sherpas of Thami, Khumjung and Namche Bazar carry still some Tibetan salt to such Rai villages as Kharikhola and Jubing, some three days' journey south of Khumbu, and exchange it for maize or millet at a rate of 4 measures of grain for 1 measure of salt. But most Rais use now Indian salt which they can obtain easily and at a much lower price. At the time when the trade with Tibet was completely interrupted Sherpas too tried to use Indian salt, but they did not like it, and they believe that if Indian salt is given to yak and other cattle the fertility of the animals will be diminished.

Today most of the trading between Sherpas and Rais is on a cash basis. The earnings of Sherpas from the tourist trade, which will be

discussed presently, have given much of the Sherpa economy a money base and this in turn finds expression in the operation of a weekly market in Namche Bazar. Although this village was always a settlement of traders and a place visited by Tibetans who came there to barter their goods for Nepalese commodities, it was not the site of a regular weekly market. In 1965, however, the local *panchayat* and the assistant commissioner stationed at Namche encouraged the establishment of a weekly market where suppliers of grain, vegetables, eggs, chickens and other produce of the middle ranges could sell their goods to the people of Khumbu. This weekly market is now a well-established institution and according to the estimates of the local officials between R12,000 and R15,000 change hands on an average bazaar day. Some 300 to 400 people from the regions south of the Sherpa country bring their wares to Namche and Sherpas from all the villages of Khumbu gather to make their purchases. The sellers, most of whom come from distances of three to six days' journey are known by the generic term of *dhakre* (basket-carriers). Sherpas who can now earn high wages in the tourist business no longer find it worth their while to travel five or six days to the south to buy cheap grain, but in the middle-ranges labour is cheap and men who could not earn more than R2 per day find it profitable to carry their grain to Namche and sell it at relatively high prices to Sherpas. Most of the *dhakre* frequenting the market are Rais, but among the men and women who carry supplies to Namche Bazar there are also some Chetris and members of other Hindu castes. Rice, maize and millet are their main wares, but some of them also bring wheat, flour of various grains, bananas, eggs and chickens. They gather on an open site just outside the village, and sit down in rows behind their baskets, calling out the price of their goods. Soon they are surrounded by a milling crowd of Sherpas, among whom mingle government employees stationed in Namche, and, of late, also some Western tourists. In addition to the men from the middle-ranges, there are sometimes also a few Sherpas of the Pharak region who sell grain and butter, and Tibetan refugees occasionally offer some dried meat for sale.

In April 1971 rice was sold at this market for R12 per *pathi*, a measure of capacity corresponding roughly to 1 gallon, and knowing that prices tend to go up before the next rice harvest, Sherpas bought large quantities to build up a store for the monsoon when

few supplies reach Namche. Transactions were in cash and the large bundles of R10 notes produced by some Sherpas were a sight seldom seen in the Khumbu of the 1950s. The amount of cash circulating in Khumbu is so great that people from the lower country jokingly say that 'there must be a mint in Khumbu producing all this money'. I also have heard Sherpas say that their people are not used to budgeting, and when they have cash in their hands, they spend it often on non-essentials. Thus while in 1957 sugar was unobtainable in Khumbu, now Sherpas buy considerable amounts, and often drink tea with sugar and milk, rather than the Tibetan salted tea.

The *dhakre* traders from the middle-ranges sell all their wares for cash, and do not buy anything from the Sherpas. The era of barter is clearly drawing to an end. Previously *dhakre* came to Namche Bazar and exchanged grain for Tibetan salt. The Namche merchants stored the grain, and then sold it to Sherpas from other villages, often on credit. Nowadays only people with ready money go to the weekly market and buy grain for cash. However, there is still some scope for credit transactions. Wealthy Sherpas purchase in the weekly market rice and other grain on speculation and store it in their houses. When the price has risen they sell it to other Sherpas either for cash or on credit. In 1970 the price of rice went up to R18 per *pathi*, thus enabling men who had stored supplies to make a profit of 33 per cent within half a year.

While the old-established traders of Namche Bazar undoubtedly engage in such transactions, buying and selling grain is no substitute for the large-scale Tibetan trade which was the mainstay of their business. They had therefore to look for new sources of income. Some of them found these in work for tourists, while others developed trade with the Kathmandu valley. Contact with the outside world and in particular with foreigners has given the Sherpas a taste for manufactured goods and such commodities as sugar, biscuits, Indian tea, condensed milk, soap, electric torches, gym shoes and a variety of clothing. As woollen handwoven materials are now in short supply, there is a growing demand for cotton textiles and some of the Namche traders have begun to buy such goods in Kathmandu and to transport them to Khumbu, where they sell them to Sherpas who have cash to spare. Thus the north-south axis of the traditional trade has partly been replaced by a flow of

trade along a route running roughly from east to west. There is also still some trade with the Terai, the low region along the Indian border, but this is diminishing as the Sherpas can no longer produce the Tibetan goods which they used to sell there, and for those buying goods for cash Kathmandu is a more convenient source of supply.

The flexibility and enterprise of Sherpa traders is demonstrated by the way in which they make use of air-transport. Since the construction of a landing-strip in 1964 by Sir Edmund Hillary at Lukla, one and a half days' walk from Namche Bazar, and the inception of numerous tourist flights by light aircraft, Sherpa guides have become accustomed to flying, usually in the company of their employers but occasionally also at their own expense. In 1972 when a bad harvest in Eastern Nepal had resulted in an unprecedented rise in food prices, several enterprising Sherpas combined to charter planes for the transport of rice and wheat-flour from Kathmandu to Lukla. Three prominent merchants of Namche Bazar chartered two flights of a twin-engine plane of the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation to carry these supplies. The price of rice in Kathmandu was then R9 per *pathi* if bought in bulk, while in Namche Bazar the price had risen to R25. The rice brought by air from Kathmandu to Lukla and by porters from Lukla to Namche Bazar was sold there for R20 per *pathi*, and this left a profit margin to the traders and resulted in a general lowering of the price of rice at Namche Bazar. In the same season a consortium of Sherpas of Lukla and Chaurikharka chartered three flights to bring grain from Kathmandu.

## Crafts

The Sherpas' traditional trade with Tibet provided not only commodities for local consumption or for resale in their original form, but also some of the raw materials required by the craftsmen of Khumbu. A great part of the Tibetan wool which used to be imported into Khumbu was employed for the manufacture of textiles needed locally as well as destined for sale to Sherpas of Solu and other populations of areas lacking direct access to supplies of wool. The dwindling of the trade with Tibet thus not only hit professional traders but had also an adverse effect on the crafts of Khumbu.

Until 1959 spinning and weaving played a vital role in the Sherpa economy. They provided the dwellers of high-altitude areas with adequate clothing of all types and served to turn some of the imported wool into commodities marketable in the villages south of Khumbu. Most men and women used to spin during their leisure and it was a common sight to see even rich men walking about the village with a piece of sheep's fleece in their left hand, manipulating with the right hand a wooden spindle made of a simple cross of wooden sticks attached to a short axle. This type of spindle, which hangs in the air and needs no support, is used for spinning yak hair and the coarse wool suitable for making blankets. Today, when the supply of wool is short, it is relatively rare to find Sherpas engaged in this type of spinning. The finer thread required for weaving the material for clothes has always been spun on smaller spindles with a disk of wood or stone, and such spindles are used only by women.

Young girls used to spin in *ngalok* organized on a basis of reciprocity in the same way as the *ngalok* for agricultural work. In some cases the same girls worked together on the fields and formed also a spinning *ngalok*, but more often the groups did not coincide. As a member of an efficient *ngalok* a young daughter could make a considerable contribution to the family's economy.

Such *ngalok* could also be established *ad hoc*. A man who had brought wool from Tibet and was anxious to process it quickly might call several women who already owed his household some labour because his wife or daughter had worked in their house. Alternatively, he could employ women for wages. In 1957 the daily wage for teasing wool or spinning was R $\frac{3}{4}$  plus food, while the rate for weaving was R1 plus food per day. Sometimes women took on the spinning of wool and were paid by piecework without receiving food. In that case, the rate was R2 for spinning about 2 lbs of wool. Nowadays a woman's daily wage is about R2 $\frac{1}{2}$  but wool is so scarce that one seldom sees women spinning or weaving.

In the old days wool was teased by hand and in this way very long staple wool was attained. Later, Sherpas acquired wire-teasers, which they bought in the bazaars of India and the larger towns of Nepal, and the staple of the wool teased on these appliances is very much shorter than that of the hand-teased wool. When the yarn is ready it may either be used for weaving in its

natural colour or it may be dyed in different colours. Cloth intended for men's clothes is woven of yarn of natural colour and may be dyed afterwards, but for the weaving of the multi-coloured, striped women's aprons the Sherpas invariably use yarn of different colours. Until the 1940s many vegetable dyes and particularly madder were used, but chemical dyes imported from Darjeeling, the plains of India and Kathmandu were rapidly gaining ground as early as 1953.

The Sherpas use two types of loom. The one employed for weaving yak hair blankets is a simple loom of the so-called Indonesian type, known as *tha*. I was told that originally no other type was used and that only some twenty years ago a more elaborate treadle loom (*tijang*) was introduced from Tibet. Today this latter type of loom is universally used for weaving woollen cloth. It can be taken apart and transported from house to house and professional weavers often bring their own loom when they weave in a house for wages.

Only women weave, but it seems that experienced weavers were always rare among the Sherpas. Indeed, the wife of a farmer owning land at different localities as well as some livestock hardly had the time to do much weaving. Immigrant Khamba women with no, or little, land to cultivate, on the other hand, used to weave professionally and they were greatly in demand. For some of them it was not unusual to be booked for several weeks ahead, and while the daily wage was fairly constant and no employer wanted to incur unpopularity by openly raising it, good weavers could be attracted by the promise of an extra bonus to be given at the end of several days' work.

While some women wove for sale on their own account, it was more usual for men to import wool, get it teased and spun by members of their family and the latter's *ngalok* friends, and then to employ a Khamba woman to weave cloth which they would ultimately take on trading trips to Pharak, Solu and the Rai country. Very little spinning and weaving was done in the whole of Pharak and most of the textiles and blankets required by the Pharak people were bought from Khumbu Sherpas. The people of the two villages of Phortse and Pangboche used to weave only for their own needs but never for sale, and they even purchased cloth from Khambas of Khumjung, giving buckwheat, butter and dried cheese in exchange.

In 1957 a length of white woollen cloth cost about R6 and about one and a half lengths are required to make a pair of men's trousers. A length of coarse coloured cloth cost R12 and a length of coloured cloth of fine thread R25. The multi-coloured aprons were more expensive and as much as R40 was paid for a length sufficient for such an apron. By 1971 the cost of a length of white woollen cloth had risen to R18, but plain coloured cloth, of either coarse or fine quality, was no longer made. Multi-coloured aprons are still being made and the best quality cost now up to R100. Yak-hair blankets which are valued on account of their durability sold in 1957 from R60 to R100, and for these there was a market far beyond the limits of the Sherpa country. In 1971 their price ranged from R120 to R140. In Khumjung there were several oldish women who made a living by weaving such blankets and in fine weather one could find them working in the open, usually in front of the house where they were employed at the time.

Special, very small looms are used for weaving the multi-coloured garters which both sexes wear with their high boots. Such garters are made of cotton thread bought in different colours in the bazaars of the Terai and the Nepal valley. They used to be sold in Tibet for R3 to 4 per pair, and as they are light and not bulky, they were suitable trade goods for those Sherpas who carried their wares on their own backs across the Nangpa La. Today they are less in demand and this may explain the fact that their price has remained constant.

The boots with which such garters were worn, are invariably made by expert craftsmen. Most of the boot-makers of Khumbu are Khambas. Sometimes they procure the materials themselves and sell the boots ready made and sometimes they are employed by clients who provide the materials. The soles of the boots are made of yak hide and the uppers of strong cloth, usually of three colours, maroon for the part covering the leg and red and green, or red and blue, for the decorative pattern covering the upper part of the foot.

There are few professional tailors. Until recently Sherpas produced most of their clothes at home, and it was only occasionally that someone bought a ready-made shirt or blouse while on a trading trip. Wealthy people, however, and those who lacked the skill



of tailoring, employed tailors who came to the house and were paid  $Rs\ 1\frac{1}{2}$  plus food per day. They cut and sewed clothes from materials provided by their employers, using the latter's main living-room as a temporary workshop. In most cases the clothes produced by such tailors paid a daily wage were intended for the employer's personal use, but there were some traders who hired tailors to produce men's gowns for sale to Sherpas in Pharak, Solu and other areas outside Khumbu. All tailoring was done by men, and while many Sherpas made their own clothes, only Khambas engaged professionally in the making of clothes.

Within the past decade the type of clothes worn by Sherpa men has undergone a great change. The drastic reduction in the supply of Tibetan wool as well as in the export of woollen cloth and made-up garments from Tibet, has forced the Sherpas to modify their style of dress. In the past Sherpa men wore, invariably, woollen trousers and coats (*bakhu*) reaching down to the knees, and on ceremonial occasions, such as marriages, most men still dress in this fashion. But worn-out woollen clothes cannot easily be replaced and the Sherpas have had no other choice than to change over to other types of clothes. Many of the younger men have worked for mountaineering expeditions and acquired thereby a stock of warm, high-altitude clothing of Western manufacture. Hence, quilted feather jackets and trousers imported from Europe or America are now commonly worn in Khumbu and there is even a market for second-hand clothes of this type. However, middle-aged and elderly men who have not worked for expeditions find it difficult to acquire mountaineering clothes, and they are reduced to wearing cotton clothes obtained in one of the towns of Nepal or made up from cotton cloth bought from India or Kathmandu. Such clothes are ill-suited to the cold climate of Khumbu, and in the attempt to keep warm some men wear two pairs of trousers, one on top of the other, and a variety of shirts and jerseys. In their traditional woollen clothes, tailored in Tibetan style, Sherpas looked very dignified but nowadays their dress is often ragged and even rich men have had to lower their sartorial standards.

The women have so far retained their customary style of dress, though they too are hard-pressed to replace their woollen clothes. Mountaineering expeditions do not bring clothes for women, and such wool as is brought from Tibet is being used to weave the

multi-coloured aprons which form the most characteristic part of the Sherpa and Tibetan female costume. Heavy cotton cloth is often substituted for woollen cloth in the making of the long shift-like dresses, while blouses are tailored either of lighter cotton material or of silk.

In the extreme cold of winter, sheepskin coats are indispensable to men herding yak or doing other work in the open. The making of such coats requires special skills. Some are made crudely of sheepskins worn with the wool on the inside, while others are silk or brocade coats lined with the soft skins of young lambs. These used to be mainly imported from Tibet and their price was high even in the 1950s, costing then already as much as R300 to 500. In 1971 such coats were virtually unobtainable and even simpler lined coats cost as much as R600.

The curing of the skins as well as of the leather used in boot-making, is not a specialist's task. There are no professional tanners in Khumbu, but most men know how to tan and soften the skins of yak, oxen and sheep. They are treated with salt and softened with fat and are then trodden under foot to make them flexible.

In every Sherpa village there are one or two carpenters, and when a house is being built the employment of such skilled artisans is indispensable, even if all the rest of the work is done by the householder and voluntary workers, who tender their help on a basis of reciprocity. In 1957 carpenters received a daily wage of R2½ to 3, and by 1971 the wage had risen to R12. Only painters who, as artists, stand on an altogether different level, and in recent years also high-altitude climbers and tourist guides, can earn a higher daily wage. Carpenters also make benches, tables, bedsteads, boxes, shelves and numerous other articles for domestic use, as well as such implements as looms and ploughs. Yet few carpenters devote themselves exclusively to their craft and most of these craftsmen spend part of their time farming their land.

Among Sherpas there are no blacksmiths or other metal-workers, but a few families of blacksmiths and silver-workers of Kami caste have settled in Namche Bazar. They belong to one of the untouchable Hindu castes, speak only Nepali and stand entirely outside Sherpa society. But they are useful in supplying the people of Khumbu with iron implements, and some of them have even the skill of making silver cups and stands for porcelain tea cups, as well

as ornaments of beaten gold. The Sherpas pay them for their services in cash, or more frequently in agricultural produce, and especially potatoes. While Sherpa society does not know any real 'untouchability', these Kami blacksmiths retain in Namche Bazar the depressed status accorded to them in the Hindu society of their original environment. They do not enter Sherpa houses and there is neither intermarriage nor inter-dining between Kamis and Sherpas.

Sherpas have no prejudice against metal-working as such. They do not hesitate to engage in tanning,\* an occupation far more polluting in Hindu eyes than work at the forge, but they came to know the Kamis as an untouchable Hindu caste and have accepted this evaluation without questioning its causes. Neither Sherpas nor Khambas have set up as blacksmiths and this abstention from metal-working seems to be common to all the Bhotia populations within Eastern Nepal. In Tibet, on the other hand, there are indigenous blacksmiths and some members of Tibetan refugee communities in Solu have taken to metal-working.

No pot-making of any kind takes place in Khumbu, and such pots as the Sherpas require have to be brought from regions of lesser altitude. But the use of earthen pots is limited, and the Sherpas cook mainly in iron pots and pans, and use copper and brass vessels for storing water.

On the whole there is only a limited occupational specialization according to crafts. The Sherpas of Khumbu do not share the Nepalese Hindus' attitude to certain types of manual work. Except for such activities as slaughtering animals, which is sinful for the strict Buddhist, there is no occupation a Sherpa considers ritually polluting though we have seen that the carrying of manure containing human excrement is thought demeaning. Prosperous men of good social status will on occasions do their own carpentry work, tailor their own clothes, cure yak hide and repair their boots by sewing on new soles. Only in those fields where special skills have to be acquired by a great deal of practice is there some scope for professional craftsmen. Thus the expert carpenter provides services which are beyond the ability of the ordinary householder, and in this respect his role is not different from that of the mason,

\* In this respect Sherpas differ from Tibetans who consider tanning, though not leather-working, an impure occupation.

employed to carve the sacred formula *Om mani padme hum* into a rock-face or the painter commissioned to paint the frescoes in a temple or private chapel. The latter's craft, often practised by monks, carries a certain prestige, however, because of the learning and knowledge of sacred scriptures, which usually go with skill in an art devoted almost entirely to religious purposes.

The Sherpas' attitude to occupational specialization resembles more the attitude of their tribal than that of their Hindu neighbours. A man's work is evaluated according to its usefulness and the profit he derives from it. There is no gradation of activities based on a distinction between pure and polluting occupations, and no Sherpa can endanger his social status by undertaking any specific task, with the one exception of the work of butchers, which offends Buddhist morality.

### *New sources of income: mountaineering and tourism*

The sudden decline of the trade with Tibet has created a gap in the economy of the Sherpas which might easily have threatened the viability of some of the communities of Khumbu. It is doubtful whether, deprived of their rôle as middlemen in the barter trade between Tibet and the lower regions of Nepal, the Sherpas could have maintained themselves in their present numbers in an environment so unfavourable to farming, had it not been possible to develop entirely new economic avenues. Fortunately for the people of Khumbu such avenues had begun to open up even before the Sherpas' traditional links with their Tibetan trading partners were destroyed by the Chinese. Service in the employment of foreign mountaineering expeditions has brought a new element into the economic pattern of the Khumbu Sherpas, and provided them with a source of income amply filling the gap which had resulted from the shrinking of their barter trade.

Before we consider the present situation with Khumbu as one of the major tourist attractions of Nepal, it will be well to sketch the picture as I found it in 1953 and 1957, when one could live in a Khumbu village for several months without encountering a single foreign visitor. Yet, even at that time, Sherpas had already earned a reputation as high-altitude porters and sturdy mountaineers, though operating mainly outside their own homeland. Until 1953

when Nepal, emerging from the isolation of the xenophobic Rana régime, was first opened to mountaineers from foreign countries, the recruiting ground for Sherpa porters and guides was mainly Darjeeling. Not only major mountaineering expeditions, such as those which attempted the conquest of Mount Everest from the direction of Tibet, but also tourists trekking in Sikkim, employed Sherpas in considerable numbers and at attractive rates of pay. How Sherpas came to settle at Darjeeling is not known in detail, but it would seem that at first it was the prospect of trade which drew Sherpas to Darjeeling and Kalimpong and that the association with mountaineering enterprises occurred at a time when they had already established themselves in the Darjeeling district. The first of these settlers belonged perhaps to the wave of emigrants from Solu who were responsible for the establishment of Sherpa communities in the Nepalese districts of Bhojpur and Dhankuta as well as in the region immediately east of the Nepal-Darjeeling border. But once the news of the earnings of expedition porters spread to Khumbu, many enterprising young men, some alone and some accompanied by their wives, went to seek their fortunes in Darjeeling. There are few families in Khumbu which cannot name one kinsman or another settled in Darjeeling and when I started to compile genealogies and family histories, I was told of the men and women living there. But again and again I heard also the melancholic statement: 'He went to Darjeeling and died there.' At first I was puzzled by the frequency of such untimely deaths, but when in 1957 I saw the cramped conditions in which most Darjeeling Sherpas then lived, I could well imagine what must have happened. Living in quarters little better than the old-fashioned coolie lines of tea gardens, and exposed to contact with the crowds of an Indian bazaar, many Sherpas fell victim to tuberculosis, venereal diseases and other infectious ailments. In the healthy climate and comparative isolation of their mountain homes they had developed no immunity against diseases common in Indian towns and many of the emigrants from Khumbu fell ill after a short time. Some went home and it is commonly believed that people returned from Darjeeling were responsible for the spread of syphilis in Khumbu. Yet others established themselves in Darjeeling and made a good living by working as high-altitude porters. Not all of these considered Darjeeling as their permanent home.

There were some Sherpas who maintained a house in Khumbu, kept their families there and stayed in Darjeeling only at that time of the year when mountaineers and tourists were likely to recruit porters, guides and camp servants. It is only with these men, who retained the ties with their home villages and continued to form part of Khumbu society, that we are concerned in this context.

When in 1953 Nepal opened the frontiers to foreign travellers and mountaineers, the incentive to seek work in Darjeeling soon disappeared. At first the Sherpas already settled in Darjeeling made great efforts to establish a monopoly of expedition work, but those resident in Khumbu fought back and with the help of the Nepalese authorities succeeded in reversing the situation and securing for themselves priority in the right to employment by mountaineering expeditions operating within the boundaries of Nepal. An important rôle in the organization of expedition labour has always been played by the so-called *sirdar*, men of exceptional climbing experience combined with the ability to control and lead other porters. Such foremen, once engaged by a group of mountaineers, usually insist on being entrusted with the recruiting of the other Sherpas, and by so doing they have built up a position of influence and economic power. As early as 1957 there were several such *sirdar* in Khumbu.

The most successful among them, such as Dawa Tenzing of Khumjung, the *sirdar* of the Kanchenjunga expedition of 1956, did very little work in their villages and left the cultivation of their land almost entirely to their wives and hired labourers. Others worked in their fields and tended their cattle whenever they were at home, or engaged in small-scale trade deals. The cash earned by expedition work was then put to various uses. Some famous Sherpa climbers, such as Anulu, the brother of Dawa Tenzing of Khumjung, or Sun Tenzing of Phortse, bought yak and set up as cattle-breeders, while others used their earnings to finance trade deals or engage in money lending.

To poor but energetic and adventurous young men, expedition work offered unique possibilities. Previously, a Sherpa without land or capital could not hope to attain more than modest prosperity even by a lifetime's hard work. The whole structure of Sherpa economics favoured the entrepreneur rather than the wage-earner, and impecunious men had to work many years in the pay of others

before they could acquire land or cattle, or venture out as independent traders. But a successful high-altitude porter could, in a single season, earn sufficient cash to engage in some modest trade deals or buy his first plot of land. At a time when an agricultural labourer was paid R1 a day, expeditions paid their high-altitude porters as much as R7½ per day, as well as providing them with rations. In addition, it soon became customary to give to the Sherpas valuable equipment, such as boots, trousers, wind jackets, pullovers, leather waistcoats, down sleeping bags and other miscellaneous items, all of which they were allowed to keep at the end of the expedition. Many porters sold this equipment to local rich men or traders, and thus earned a substantial bonus.

The sudden affluence of successful porters brought to the fore men of a class which used to live in the shadow of the rich families of inherited wealth. The rest of the community tended at first to view the mountaineers' contact with a new world with some suspicion. It was argued that long periods of absence unfit a man for the tenure of any of the more important village offices, and conservative Sherpas expressed the view that frequent work for expeditions produced anegocentric attitude inconsistent with Sherpa ideals. There may have been some truth in this allegation. Some *sirdar* had the tendency to be grasping and to demand high commissions from those whom they recruited for major expeditions, and among the less successful there was much resentment against such an abuse of economic power. A further complaint against expedition porters was that many of the younger men used their earnings largely for themselves though they continued to live in a household maintained by the efforts of their brothers who worked on the family's land without having any personal cash income.

Several well-known high-altitude porters were Khambas of humble origin\* and there developed a discrepancy between their status within their own village community and their position as highly paid experts on mountaineering expeditions. Thus Chang-jup, a first generation immigrant, inhabited in 1957 one of the most

\* Tenzing of Mount Everest fame is an outstanding example of a landless Khamba, who owes his fortune solely to mountaineering success. He was born in Tibet, came to Khumbu as a young boy, and worked for several years for one of the rich families of Khumjung.

insignificant single-storeyed houses in the Khamba quarter of Khumjung and his voice counted for little in village affairs, but the British Kanchenjunga team had thought so highly of his mountaineering abilities that they paid his air-fare to England and this gave him an opportunity to see more of the world than most of the old-established leaders of the village could ever hope to see. It is characteristic of the Sherpas that on the whole they were not impressed by such a sudden rise to prominence in a sphere outside the framework of their traditional culture. The expedition worker who wanted to gain social recognition had therefore to invest his earnings in things which had prestige value in Sherpa eyes. He might buy land or yak, or set up as an independent trader. Several well-known climbers did this and by joining the class of yak-owners they established themselves among the men who counted on the councils of the village.

As early as the 1950s it had become evident that the earnings from work for mountaineering expeditions were benefiting many Sherpa families of Khumbu. Poor young men of adventurous spirit began to acquire a modest capital of their own and the cash which flowed into Khumbu in the form of porters' wages and payments for supplies enabled Sherpas to purchase some goods of foreign manufacture, which normally would have been outside the reach of all except the richest traders. Against these advantages must be set the relatively frequent casualties among high-altitude porters. Of the families which provided porters there were few which had not suffered the loss of at least one of their members. Many of the casualties were not due to mountaineering accidents, but to illness and infectious diseases to which porters, returning after the exertions of an expedition through low country, easily fell victim.

During the past decade there has been a rapid development of tourism, and while previously only organized mountaineering expeditions and a few scholars ventured into the remoter mountain regions of Nepal, trekking has become a sport attracting increasing numbers of foreign tourists. Being experienced in work with foreigners, enterprising and used to long-distance travel, the Sherpas prove excellent guides and camp servants, and today they are employed not only for tours to the Sherpa country but also for climbing and trekking in Western Nepal.

During the seven months I stayed in Khumbu in 1957 the area



was visited only by one Swiss official of F.A.O. and two mountaineers. In twelve months between July 1969 and June 1970, 642 tourists with trekking permits checked in at the police station of Namche Bazar and in the nine months from July 1970 and the beginning of April 1971 the number of tourists was 533. Neither of these figures includes the members of organized mountaineering expeditions. In the spring of 1971 three major expeditions were operating in the Khumbu area: an international Mount Everest expedition, a South Korean Lhotse expedition and a Japanese expedition climbing on a minor peak. The Mount Everest expedition alone employed sixty Sherpas, including three *sirdar*, high-altitude climbers, cooks, kitchen boys and wood carriers.

The rates of pay commanded by Sherpas employed by mountaineering expeditions are high by Nepalese standards. In 1971-2 *sirdar* were paid an average daily wage of R25, high-altitude climbers and cooks R15, and porters, both men and women, carrying supplies and wood to the base-camp R10. These daily wages do not represent the entire income of the more senior mountaineering Sherpas. *Sirdar* often act as contractors for the supply of local produce such as potatoes, fresh meat, eggs, vegetables and even rice, and their profit margin may be considerable.

The employment of Sherpas for mountaineering and trekking is now well-organized. In 1957 a Himalayan Society was established and this society acts as an employment agency for Sherpas. Its headquarters is at Kathmandu and there are branches at Namche Bazar, Pokhara and Dharan. Tsiring Tensing Lama, a prominent Sherpa of Solu, is the chairman and the board of directors consists of Sherpas and other Nepalis. In 1971 350 Sherpas were on the books of the society and among them were thirty-five *sirdar*.

Apart from this society there exists now a touring agency called 'Mountain Travel' which retained during the period September 1970 to April 1971 the services of fifty-three Sherpas. The rates tourists pay for trekking work are lower than those paid by mountaineering expeditions, but by 1974 these too had risen to R25 for *sirdar* and R15 for porters.

According to the estimates of my Sherpa informants, about 500 Khumbu men work part of the year for mountaineers and tourists, and in a demographic survey conducted in 1970 in the villages of Khumbu by S. D. R. Lang and Ann Lang, the medical officers of

the Khunde hospital,\* expedition and tourist work was recorded as the main occupation of 305 of the inhabitants of Khumbu. From my own investigations of 1971 it appeared that in the villages of Khumjung and Khunde about 70 per cent of the households contain at least one member sometimes engaged in work connected with mountaineering and tourism, and some of the younger men spend as much as eight or nine months of the year away from their village. The fact that nowadays many Sherpas are employed in trekking work in Western Nepal makes it impossible for them to return home in between periods of employment, and some of them have secondary establishments in Kathmandu, where they can be joined by their wives. For the past fifteen years some Sherpas have also worked as servants in the houses of Europeans and Americans, and such men tend to bring their whole family to Kathmandu. Even those whose economic base has shifted to the Nepal Valley retain their houses and land-holdings in Khumbu, and intend, no doubt, to return there in their old age. No man of Khumjung or Khunde has as yet sold his house and permanently moved to Kathmandu, but three men of Namche Bazar have done so. Seeing no prospects for an early revival of trade in Khumbu, they left their home and are engaged in business enterprises in Kathmandu.

Apart from the cash earnings of Sherpas employed by mountaineers, tourists and foreign residents, the economy of Khumbu benefits also from the payments of tourists for supplies and accommodation while they are in Sherpa villages. The tradition of hospitality typical of Sherpas and Tibetans makes it easy for tourists to find shelter and food in Sherpa houses, and what began as casual *ad hoc* arrangements is in the process of being developed as a regular business. One progressive Sherpa of Khunde has already built an attractive annexe to his house with the express purpose of letting it to tourists, and others are planning to turn whole houses into simple inns. This development has been greatly stimulated by the building of an hotel on a hill above Khumjung by a consortium of Japanese and Nepalese which will cater for wealthy tourists willing and able to pay U.S. \$50 per day. While the new hotel, which is luxuriously equipped, will be patronized

\* S. D. R. Lang and Ann Lang, 'The Kunde Hospital and a demographic survey of the Upper Khumbu, Nepal', *The New Zealand Medical Journal*, Vol. 74, 1971, No. 470, pp. 1-8.

only by the most affluent tourists, many trekkers will be satisfied with simpler accommodation and several enterprising Sherpas intend to cash in on that market.

The new hotel, however, has already provided the Sherpas with much well-paid employment. While it was under construction over 100 Sherpas worked for about a year in preparing the site, carrying timber and stones, and helping the Newar craftsmen brought from Kathmandu in the actual building work. The men earned a daily wage of R9-10 and the women R7. The workers had to find their own food, but as most of them were people from Khumjung and Khunde and ate in their own houses, their expenditure on food was not great and the wages much higher than those paid locally to farm-workers. In addition to the building workers, several women of Khumjung were employed to carry water for a daily wage of R9. At that time all water required for such tasks as the mixing of cement had to be brought from the spring of Khumjung about half an hour's walk from the site. Two Sherpa women moreover seized the opportunity of catering for the needs of the Japanese supervisors and Nepali craftsmen camping on the site. They opened a stall where they sold tea and home-brewed beer and on good days their takings were as much as R60-70 though at times they dropped to as little as R10-15. Yet, the enterprise of these women, one of whom was the wife of a well-off guide and climber demonstrates the Sherpas' ability to make the best of new economic opportunities.

In 1972 a landing-strip suitable for light aircraft was being constructed on a ledge below the new hotel. Ang Chiri, one of the richest men of Khumjung, obtained a contract worth R300,000 to provide labour for moving earth and preparing the runway, while the Japanese organized the blasting of rocks. The construction work provided employment for hundreds of Sherpas. At times up to 200 men and women of Khumjung and Khunde – the greater part of the resident population – 100 people from Thami, 40 from Phortse and 20 to 30 from Pangboche participated in the work. According to the type of work done men got daily wages of R10-12, and women and children were paid R7 per day. These wages did not include food, but the possibility of

earning cash wages for unskilled labour caused the agricultural wage to rise to a comparable level. In 1972 men could get up to R12 for heavy agricultural work and women were paid a daily wage of R7. The employers provided such workers with tea and boiled potatoes, but the old custom of preparing full cooked meals for casual labourers has been abandoned under the growing influence of money on the wage structure.

It is likely that the new tourist facilities based on Khumbu will counteract the present movement of Sherpas to Kathmandu, and make it possible for men to work in tourism without being separated from their wives and families for the greater part of the year. Most of the staff of the new hotel will undoubtedly be recruited in Khumbu, and even before it was opened, the management offered some Sherpa *sirdar* permanent appointments at a salary of R380 per month with an annual holiday of fifteen days. Attractive as the relative security of such a job seemed, the men concerned were hesitating to bind themselves, because they had hopes of profiting from the tourist boom as entrepreneurs rather than as employees of an organization controlled from outside.

Once affluent tourists are drawn to Khumbu there are various ways in which Sherpas can employ their highly developed business sense. There are already signs of a commercialization of some traditional activities. Kapa Kalden, the most famous painter of Khumbu, used to take on commissions for the painting of frescoes in monasteries and village temples both in Nepal and Tibet. In 1957 he charged a daily wage of R5 plus his food. Now he concentrates entirely on painting pictures for sale to tourists and Western residents in Kathmandu. He charges R400 for a large *thangka* which he can produce in a fortnight, and R200 for a small painting. His eldest son, who at one time worked for a Swiss aid mission, has also given up all other work and does painting as a full-time occupation. Father and son have always sufficient commissions. It is not surprising that their paintings have become somewhat stereotyped and cannot bear comparison with the exquisite frescoes painted by Kapa Kalden when he applied his very considerable talent to the decoration of *gompa* and the chapels of clients brought up on the tradition of Tibetan art.

## Social and Political Change

The partial transformation of the economy of Khumbu has had considerable repercussions on the social life of the Sherpas. Two phenomena are immediately apparent to anyone who knew Khumbu before external events disrupted the traditional economic pattern: the composition of village society has become unbalanced because of the absence of a large percentage of the young men during the greater part of the year, and economic power has shifted from the older men of long-established Sherpa families to young and middle-aged men who are not necessarily of families enjoying inherited high status.

According to a house-to-house census which I undertook in 1957, the population of Khumbu was then just under 2200. This figure included Sherpas, Khambas and Tibetans living in Sherpa villages, but not the Nepalese policemen and Indian checkpoint personnel temporarily stationed in Namche Bazar. A census conducted in 1970 by the staff of the Khunde hospital\* yielded a total figure of 2,761 persons, but among those were 57 Nepalis living temporarily in Namche Bazar and 246 Tibetans who had arrived after 1959 as refugees, and 2 Indians. By deducting 305 from the total figure of 2,761 we arrive at a resident population of 2,456 Sherpas and settled 'Khambas'. The increase of roughly 256 persons within a period of thirteen years, is below the average for Nepal, but large enough to explain an extension of cultivation in such villages as Khumjung and Khunde. The life-expectancy is low and half of the population is below twenty-five years of age. The total male working population was recorded as 775 and of these 266 men were engaged in expedition work and tourism, 251 in farming, 133 (mainly Tibetans) were monks, 63 were full-time traders. Thus employment in connection with tourism stands first, and has overtaken both farming and trade. The figures for male workers must

\* cf. S. D. R. Lang and Ann Lang, *op. cit.*

not be seen in isolation, however, for 621 women recorded as 'housewives', are clearly mainly engaged in agriculture and to these must be added 150 women who gave 'farming' as their main occupation. These figures place farming ahead of tourism when the entire population is considered, but the fact remains that men engaged in tourism form the largest single group.

In my book *The Sherpas of Nepal* I have shown that as late as 1957 the villages of Khumbu were virtually autonomous except for the levy of a very modest land-tax by the government of Nepal. The task of collecting this tax was entrusted to a number of prominent men known as *pembu*, who stood in a patron-relationship – usually hereditary – to the men whose land-revenue they collected. Other civic tasks and responsibilities, the enforcement of rules laid down by the village assembly, and the control of such natural resources as the village-forests, were allocated according to a system of rotation combined with the informal selection of men suitable for various offices. The system worked well at a time when the village-communities were largely self-contained and contacts with outsiders were slight. Though in theory the laws of the state applied to Khumbu as much as to any other part of the kingdom, in practice no outside agency intervened in the affairs of the Khumbu people, as long as they arranged to pay the annual revenue to the appropriate government office, which was located at Okhaldunga, the district headquarters.

With the improvement of communications and the establishment of a type of grass-roots democracy based on the *panchayat* system throughout Nepal in 1963, the Sherpas were inevitably drawn into a wider political network. Khumbu is now divided into two wards; one consists of Khumjung, Khunde, Phortse, Tengboche, Pangboche and Dingboche, and the other ward consists of Namche Bazar and the entire Thami-Thamote area. Each of these wards has a separate *panchayat* headed by a chairman (*pradhan panch*). The ordinary *panchayat* members, who represent the population of the villages, comprised within the ward, are elected informally by a show of hands but a ballot is conducted for the position of chairman.

In 1971 two prominent men of the twin villages Khumjung-Khunde competed for the chairmanship of the *panchayat* of

their ward. Konje Chunbi of Thaktu clan who won the election, had held the position of *pembu* long before the present system of *panchayat* was introduced. Both he and his forceful wife belonged to old-established families of Khumjung, but though he occupies one of the best houses, he is not among the richest men of the village. His opponent was Ongsho Lama, whose original home was in Solu and who had settled in Khumjung as the son-in-law of a wealthy man of great prestige. His father-in-law and first wife had died long ago, and he had moved to Khunde, where his second wife owned a house. Ongsho Lama officiates at many ceremonies and rites, and his experience in religious matters gives him prestige even though he is not considered a lama of great spiritual powers. His main interests, however, lie in the secular sphere, and in the days of party politics in the 1950s and early 1960s he played a minor rôle in the local branch of the Nepal congress. His economic base, however, is modest. For several years he was a member of the *panchayat* and would have been chosen again if he had not stood for the position of chairman. In the election, which was by ballot, he was defeated, but it is characteristic of the relaxed tone of Sherpa politics that his relations with his successful rival, Konje Chunbi, remained entirely amicable. On one occasion I found him in the latter's house giving Konje Chunbi a hand in cutting out the material for the coat to be made for one of the girls of the household. Neither of the two men considered this task in any way demeaning.

The vice-chairman of the *panchayat* was Doli, the wife of Mingma Tsiring of Khunde, one of the most prominent *sirdar* who held a permanent paid position in the organization of Sir Edmund Hillary. The three other members of the *panchayat* were Pemba, the son of Thaktua, Nima Tensing, a rich Khamba, and Droma Chamji, the daughter of the famous painter Kapa Kalden and wife of Ang Tsiring, the son of Mendoza. In 1972 there were some changes in the personnel of the *panchayat*, but these did not affect the balance of the interests represented. Konje Chunbi was still chairman, while Mingma Tsiring of Khunde had taken the place of his wife Doli as vice-chairman, and Ang Tsiring had replaced his wife Droma Chamji. Pemba, who had died on a trading trip to Tibet, on the

other hand, had been succeeded by his widow Tsing Droma, a woman without living children who inhabited with only one servant girl the enormous house of the rich Thaktua family. Nima Tensing, the only Khamba on the council, had retained his position as *panchayat* member, and Lhakpa Nurbu of Thaktu clan, who after his elder brother's death in a climbing accident was one of the wealthiest men in Khumjung and had been to school at Kathmandu, held the position of secretary. There was one additional *panchayat* member from Khunde, and the villages of Phortse and Pangboche were represented by one member each. Pasang Tundu, the younger brother of the reincarnate Abbot of Tengboche monastery had joined the *panchayat*, replacing a layman of Pangboche.

The two most prominent old families of Khumjung, known by the house-names Thaktua and Mendoza, were represented on the *panchayat*, both in 1971 and 1972 and one of the wealthy Khamba families, which had been settled in Khumjung for three generations, also had a seat on the *panchayat*. The presence of women on the *panchayat* reflects their enhanced position resulting no doubt from the frequent absence of men on expedition and trekking business. In the 1950s women were vocal in the house and in purely social gatherings, but they never intervened openly in the discussions of the village assembly. Now they participate vigorously in *panchayat* meetings which are often held in public, and recently a woman even won the election for the chairmanship of the *panchayat* of Namche Bazar.

Although the Sherpa *panchayats* conform to the system of basic democracy established throughout the kingdom of Nepal, and their composition is the result of a novel system of elections, they function in a manner similar to that of traditional Sherpa institutions. Many of my informants voiced the view that the method of dealing with disputes has changed little, and that the *panchayat* members act in the same way as previously, the *pembu* and other village officials had acted. In theory local disputes which cannot be settled by the *panchayat* members and other leading persons of a village can be referred to a meeting of all the *panchayat* members of a ward, but in practice this rarely happens, and the full *panchayat* only meets to discuss matters of general interest.





The weekly market at Namche Bazar



Houses and fields at Chepua, Arun valley  
Houses in Thudam village

The *panchayat* of a ward levies a small tax, ranging from R2 for a big house to R $\frac{1}{4}$  for the smallest house, half of this tax is used for village purposes while half goes to the district *panchayat*. The ward *panchayat* may, moreover, apply to the district *panchayat* for funds for development projects. The chairman of the ward *panchayat* acts as a link between the people of his ward and the district *panchayat*.

Any application for permission to fell trees for purposes of house-building, for instance, must be recommended by the chairman before it can be presented to the district *panchayat*.

The establishment of statutory *panchayats* has not made the institution of *naua* or 'village guardians'\* obsolete. Such village guardians are still being appointed, their selection being the result of informal discussions in villages such as Khumjung or Khunde or determined by a system of automatic rotation such as in Phortse. Matters such as the utilization of pastures are still being dealt with by the village guardians, but it would seem that their importance is diminishing even though at present the institution co-exists with the new *panchayat* system.

In addition to the village guardians there were in the traditional system of village government officials specifically charged with the task of protecting the village-forests. These forest-guards (*shingonaua*) were selected from among the members of old-established Sherpa families and they had the right to fine anyone guilty of unauthorized fellings within an area traditionally considered as protected village-forest. In a region of high altitude close to the tree-line, where timber resources are limited, the institution of forest-guards met a real need, but in the new system of administration there is no place for such a local control of resources. All forests which are not on privately owned land have been declared state forests and the villagers have no more control over them. Persons who require timber for house building have now to apply to the office of the district *panchayat* which is at Salleri in Solu, at least four days' walk from Khumbu. The permits issued by that office specify the quantity of timber to be felled. The procedure is cumbersome, and as there are no officials of the forest department in Khumbu, unauthorized fellings cannot be controlled. The forests in the vicinity of villages have already been seriously

\* See *The Sherpas of Nepal*, pp. 105-9.

depleted, and particularly near Namche Bazar whole hill-slopes which were densely forested in 1957 are now bare of tree growth and villagers have to go further and further even to collect dry fire-wood. In this case the replacement of an efficient and well-tryed system of local control by a bureaucratic machinery has not been successful, and the Sherpas are conscious of the diminishment of local timber resources without being able to stop the inroads into forests which, being claimed by government as state property, are no longer under their control.

Sherpa villages used to be characterized by their unity of purpose and the absence of factionalism. The interests of the villagers were seldom in conflict, and disputes between individuals could usually be settled by mediation. The village was the focal point of the aspirations of all inhabitants, and economic advancement and the build-up of prestige was considered in the terms of a man's position within the village-community. Now, however, the focus of many Sherpas' interests has shifted to the economic possibilities provided by tourism, and success in this sphere and in business enterprises located in Kathmandu, provides an alternative to the acquisition of influence in local affairs. There are indications that Sherpa villages are no longer united in their reaction to events and propositions originating outside the confines of Sherpa society. This became obvious when a consortium dominated by a Japanese group began the building of an hotel on a site considered by the people of Khumjung as being part of their village-land. The employment provided by the project was of obvious advantage to the villagers, but there was understandable resentment about the destruction of forest involved in the scheme. In the assessment of the balance of advantages and disadvantages of the hotel project, the village split and individuals took up positions according to the personal benefits they could expect from the scheme.

There is an obvious conflict between the interests of the older men with considerable holdings of land and herds of cattle, who depend for their farming on hired labour, and younger men, who see their future in the development of tourism and want to sell their labour at the highest possible rate. Such projects as the new hotel near Khumjung impinge on the supply of labour, and are hence frowned upon by the established landowners, while they are

welcomed by younger men keen to take advantage of modern developments.

The shift from trade to employment in mountaineering and tourism has worked to the disadvantage of the older men in yet another way. In the past many middle-aged and even fairly old men were active in the trade with Tibet and it was not unusual for wealthy men in their sixties to visit business friends in Tingri and other Tibetan towns. Their prestige, long-standing connections and experience enabled them to conclude favourable trade deals; and the transport of goods or cattle could be entrusted to younger members of their families. In mountaineering and tourism, on the other hand, there is no place for older men, and the income from these sources goes almost entirely to relatively young men. There is also a shift of wealth from the previously dominant Sherpa families to men of relatively humble origin. Secure in their leading rôle in trade and yak-herding the men of most old-established families showed at first little interest in work for expeditions and though the attitude of the younger generation has changed, several of the prominent families of Khumbu have been left behind in the competition for a share in the mountaineering and tourist business.

The growing importance of cash earnings and the corresponding diminishment of the Sherpas' interest in preserving a family's land holdings and herds undivided seems to have affected their attitude to polyandry. This form of marriage used to be a highly respectable device to prevent the fragmentation of property and foster the solidarity of brothers.\* Today, when most men rely on outside employment to maintain themselves and their wives and children, the undivided retention of a family's estate appears less important and the main *raison d'être* for two brothers sharing a wife has lost its validity.

It is significant that in Khumjung, a village greatly involved in the change-over to a new economic pattern, there were in 1971 no polyandrous marriages. All or some of the spouses of those existing in 1957 had died and no new polyandrous unions had been concluded. In Phortse, a relatively isolated and conservative village, on the other hand, I counted in 1971 five polyandrous marriages, some of which had been established relatively recently. The number of

\* cf. *The Sherpas of Nepal*, p. 68.

monogamous marriages was thirty-six and three men lived in polygynous unions.

The change in the Sherpas' economic circumstances is not the only factor militating against polyandry. Increasing contacts with the Hindu society of the middle-ranges and particularly Kathmandu, has made the Sherpas self-conscious about customs strongly condemned by Hindus of all shades. While associations with European and American tourists may counteract the influence of the Hindu prejudice against beef-eating and most Sherpas unhesitatingly eat yak meat and beef if they have the opportunity to do so, polyandry is alien to Western as well as Hindu ideas and there is hence a double motivation to abandon this form of marriage. The Sherpas of Phortse, on the other hand, have little contact with the outside world and among them polyandry survives as a respectable and desirable arrangement.

Though anyone familiar with the social scene in the Khumbu of the 1950s can clearly perceive the changes now taking place, there is as yet no violent disruption of the old order and the transition from a society in which influence is linked to inherited wealth and seniority to a situation favouring the young and enterprising is going on smoothly. The Sherpas' inbred courtesy and sense of decorum makes the successful young entrepreneurs and well-paid mountaineers respect the dignity of the representatives of the old order, and the trust in the traditional leaders is still great enough to assure their election to such posts as chairman of the village *panchayat*. Thus there is as yet no break with the past, and Sherpa villages have retained their atmosphere of friendliness and co-operation even though sectional interests are sometimes in conflict. Those who knew Khumbu in the 1950s cannot fail to discern, however, a certain deterioration in the quality of life, and this is due to the frequent and prolonged absence of many of the younger men and the unnatural solitary life imposed on their wives.

An important factor in the change of the social climate is the education scheme established by Sir Edmund Hillary in 1961. At present there are six schools in Khumbu and 43 per cent of the children of school age are enrolled as pupils of these schools even though they do not necessarily attend throughout the year. Five of the schools were built by the Himalayan Trust, initiated and

organized by Sir Edmund Hillary, and the school at the Tengboche monastery was constructed as a joint effort of the Himalayan Trust and the government of India. The school at Namche Bazar is being operated by the Nepalese government and the remaining five are financed and administrated by the Himalayan Trust. The following table, which is based on the figures collected by Dr. S. D. R. Lang and Ann Lang, gives the distribution of pupils and teachers in the six schools of Khumbu:

<i>Location of school</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Total of pupils</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
Namche Bazar	18	35	53	3
Khumjung	96	51	147	5
Thami	15	33	48	2
Phortse	17	6	23	1
Pangboche	14	14	28	2
Tengboche	14	0	14	1
Total	174	139	313	14

The relatively small number of boy pupils in the school at Namche Bazar is explained by the fact that in 1970 about twenty-five children resident at Namche Bazar attended the school at Khumjung, notwithstanding the daily 1,500 feet climb involved.

While the literacy rate has always been high among Sherpas, the only language people could read and write was Tibetan, and there were very few Sherpas who had any knowledge of written Nepali although many spoke it very fluently. In the Hillary schools Nepali is the medium of instruction and there is also some teaching of English. In the Khumjung school children normally are taught up to the fifth standard, and there are special facilities for students to read up to the sixth standard. Exceptionally gifted students are given the chance of going on to high schools at Salleri, Jiri and Kathmandu, and there are a number of Sherpa boys who have passed the examination for the School Leaving Certificate. In the absence of qualified Sherpas from Nepal, the teachers in the Hillary schools were recruited from among the Sherpa community in Darjeeling, but it is expected that soon sufficient locally trained Sherpas will be available to staff the schools in Khumbu.

It seems likely, however, that the most gifted and ambitious young Sherpas will not seek employment in schools, but will aspire to the greater material rewards which, in their opinion, the tourist business has to offer. Already there are Sherpas who have travelled

in Europe and the U.S.A. and it is by no means unlikely that the successors of the rich, long-distance traders of Namche Bazar will be Sherpas able to operate tours and develop local inns suitable for foreign visitors.

The intellectual and spiritual life of the Sherpas has developed within the framework of Tibetan Buddhism. Monasteries were the centres of all cultural activities, and village rituals were performed according to Buddhist traditions. Lamas provided education both for those preparing for a religious life and for boys without such aspirations but intent on acquiring the ability to read and write for both practical and religious purposes. Until recently there was no alternative to this type of education, and lamas never lacked pupils anxious to profit from their skill and wisdom.

The first half of the twentieth century saw a great expansion of religious institutions in Khumbu and Solu, and the Sherpa country as a whole was a most fertile soil for the growth of Buddhist culture and ideology. When I visited Khumbu in 1953 and 1957 the monasteries of Tengboche and Thami were thriving institutions, and the number of novices seemed to augur well for their future development.

In 1971, however, the scene had changed. The majority of the Sherpas were undoubtedly still firm believers in the Buddhist doctrine and there was no sign of the appearance of any rival ideology. But the practical interest in religious institutions and performances had noticeably diminished. This was most clearly apparent in the monastery of Tengboche. In 1957 the monastic community consisted of the reincarnate abbot and thirty-two monks of all ages. By 1971 the number of monks had dropped to fourteen and only two were boys in the early stages of their training as monks. Three monks had recently died, but nine had left to return to secular life. Two of them had enlisted among the porters of a mountaineering expedition without even informing the abbot. The reincarnate lama spoke sadly about the decline in religious fervour and learning. Hardly any of the remaining monks were interested in scholarship, and while they were still keen on such ritual performances as the Mani rimdu, which has become a tourist attraction, they cared little about their deeper content. The outward appearance of the monastery confirmed the waning interest of both monks and laymen.



While in the past Sherpas gave rich donations to religious institutions, the present generation is much less generous. Most of the cash is now in the hands of young men who, though not outspokenly irreligious, have little interest in gaining merit by devoting their wealth to the support of religion. Previously old men controlled much of the wealth of Khumbu. Many of them spent lavishly to maintain monasteries, built religious monuments such as *chorten* and *mani*-walls, and commissioned ritual performances. It is significant that within the past decade in the whole Khumjung-Khunde area not a single rock inscription has been newly carved, whereas in earlier years many were commissioned to gain merit or to commemorate a deceased relative who would benefit from the acquired merit.

Not only recruitment to monastic communities but also to the village priesthood has dramatically fallen. In 1957 there were six lamas available for services in the *gompa* shared by Khumjung and Kunde. In 1971 three of them had died, and there is no replacement in sight. Of the remaining three lamas, one of whom is very old and frail, none has pupils training for the priesthood. The very talented son of one of the surviving lamas – and, incidentally, the grandson of a famous lama – has been educated in a Hillary school and a boarding school in Kathmandu, speaks fluent English and German, has worked in Europe and the U.S.A. and is active in the promotion of tourism. A generation earlier only an ecclesiastical career would have offered scope for his intellectual ability and enterprise.

At present the dearth of Sherpa lamas does not yet seriously interfere with the performance of rites, because among the Tibetan refugees, who in 1959 streamed into Khumbu, there were many lamas, and some of them have remained in the region living in small communities within easy reach of Sherpa villages. They are always on call and Sherpas wishing to have a domestic ceremony performed can easily obtain their services. Hence there is no immediate danger that those attached to the traditional Buddhist ritual performances will be frustrated by a lack of ritual practitioners, but as the groups of Tibetan lamas and nuns are not self-perpetuating communities the prospects for the future of Buddhism in Khumbu cannot be regarded as favourable.

## *Conclusions*

The situation in which the Sherpas find themselves today does not conform to the usual pattern of the integration of ethnic minorities into larger economic and political systems. The termination of their traditional contacts with Tibet through political events outside their control has forced them to reorientate their economy and to seek new sources of income. But unlike many other communities in similar situations, such as for instance some of the tribal minorities of India, they were able to avoid entering into a relationship of dependence with any numerically and politically superior population. They have not had to link their economy with that of any of the dominant castes of Nepal, but have developed their rôle in the tourist industry of Nepal in the spirit of potential entrepreneurs and not as labourers seeking work outside their own homeland. Sherpa climbers and tourist guides consider themselves as professionals and they have been able to establish a monopoly which is not seriously threatened by any other community of Nepal. Thanks to the admiration and affection felt by Western mountaineers for their Sherpa companions they have acquired a certain mystique, and Western tourists have come to regard Sherpas as indispensable helpers not only in mountain-climbing but also on any trek in areas where experience in camping, resourcefulness and reliability are essential qualities in guides and tour-servants. The relatively large wages Sherpas can command reflect the estimation in which they are held, and the ability to earn such wages facilitates the accumulation of capital which the last generation of climbers invested in the traditional way in land and cattle, but which modern Sherpas are prepared to invest in the creation of tourist facilities in their own villages.

The collapse of the trade with Tibet and of many trading contacts assiduously built up and passed on from generation to generation has not led to any despondency or loss of initiative, but has stimulated the Sherpas to enter a new field of enterprise, a field to which they brought all the skill and spirit of adventure they had developed as independent traders.

Buddhism is still the accepted ideology and respect is paid to such symbols as reincarnate lamas notwithstanding the fact that

many different interests compete for the attention and the resources of the younger members of the community. Though Sherpas have recently had increasing contact with the Hindu population of Nepal, there is no indication that Hinduism has had any impact on their beliefs or social attitudes. They remain a people proud and conscious of their identity, and determined to preserve the basic features of their traditional style of life within the framework of a modernized society.

## *Bhotias of the Arun and Tamur Regions*

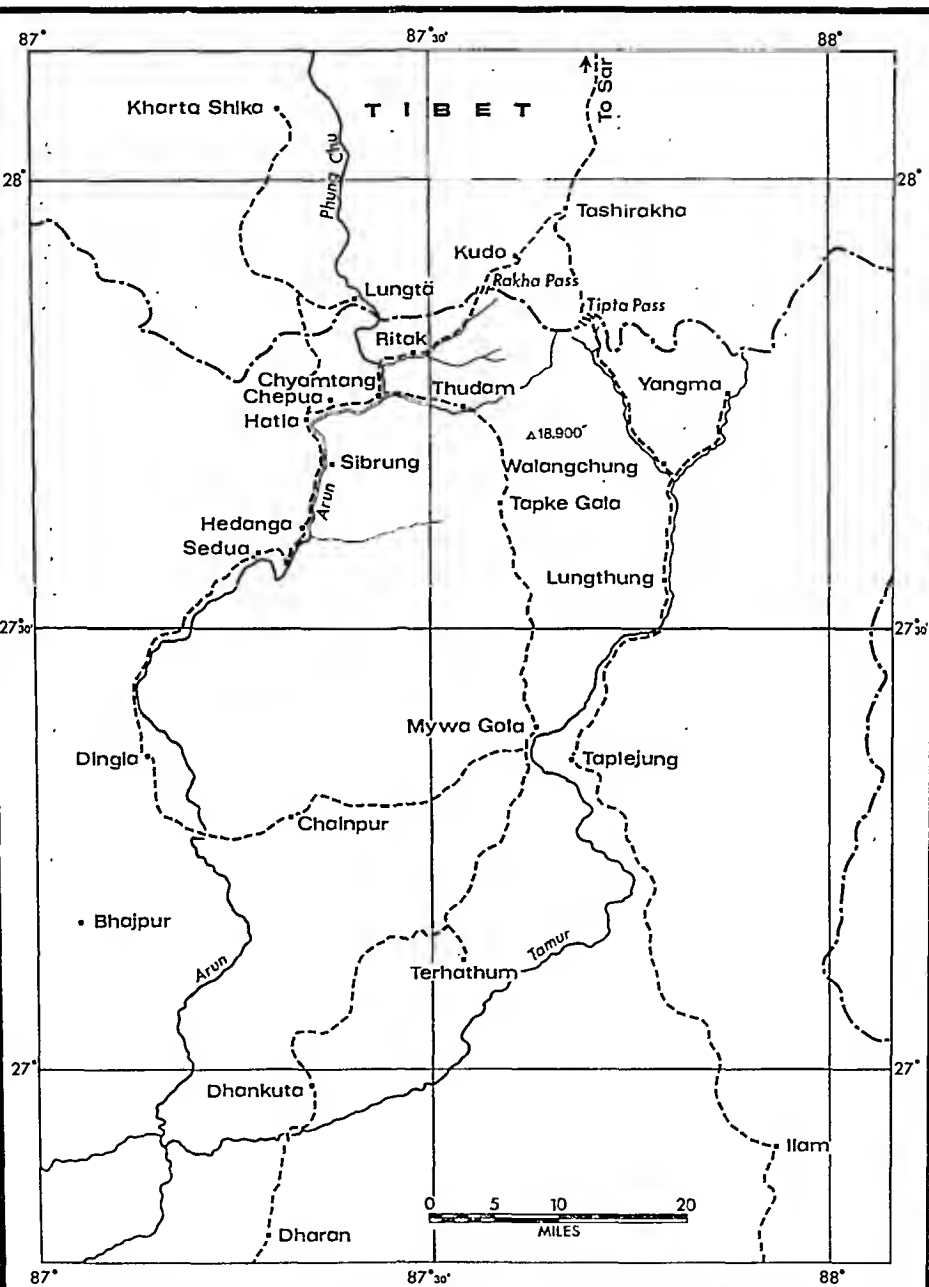
Khumbu, Pharak and Solu contain the largest concentration of populations of Tibetan language and cultural background in Eastern Nepal, but in the regions of the upper Arun and the Tamur river there dwell ethnic groups of similar cultural and racial characteristics. No intensive anthropological research has as yet been done among any of these groups, and the information presented in this chapter is based almost exclusively on relatively superficial observations made during an exploratory survey in 1957. I had hoped that my visit to the area would encourage other anthropologists to take up the study of these groups of border people, but this hope has remained unfulfilled and the only short account of the Bhotias of easternmost Nepal is that of Dor Bahadur Bista, my companion and research assistant on that same tour in 1957.\* In view of this it would seem that even fragmentary data must be drawn upon in any endeavour to fill out the admittedly still very incomplete picture of the Tibetan-speaking people on Nepal's northern border.

The three groups of which I have some first-hand information are the Lhomis† or Kar Bhotes of the upper Arun region, the people of the area of Ritak, Thudam and Topke Gola, and the inhabitants of Walongchung Gola and several other villages in the Tamur valley.

The Lhomis or Kar Bhotes are concentrated in a group of villages situated on the slopes and broad ledges high above the Arun river, which in that area runs through a deep gorge. The Tibetan border lies less than five miles to the north of these villages,

\* Dor Bahadur Bista, *People of Nepal*, Kathmandu 1967, pp. 145-52.

† Lhomi is not a tribal name, but a Tibetan generic term for 'lowlanders'; seen from Tibet the inhabitants of the upper Arun region are lowlanders.



and the Lhomis' position *vis-à-vis* their Tibetan neighbours corresponds to that of the Khumbu Sherpas *vis-à-vis* the people of Tingri. Yet, there is a world of difference between the two regions. While Khumbu with its flourishing Buddhist institutions and trade links extending as far as Lhasa used to be an extension of the Tibetan cultural sphere, Tibetan influence on the Lhomis is in the nature of a thin veneer, and in their material culture and some aspects of their appearance and style of life they reminded me of such tribes of the Indo-Tibetan borderlands as Mönbas, Daflas and Hill Miris, located more than 400 miles to the east of the Arun valley. Though Sikkim and Bhutan intervene between the two regions, there is a strong likelihood that at one time Mongoloid tribal populations of relatively primitive culture occupied many of the forested hill-regions south of the Himalayan main-range. Support for this hypothesis can be seen in the fact that in the upper Arun valley only a day's journey from the nearest Lhomi village there are Rai settlements with pile-dwellings barely distinguishable from the raised bamboo and timber structures of the Assam Himalayas.

Despite their proximity to the Tibetan plateau and some major Himalayan peaks the Lhomi villages lie at altitudes of little more than 8,000 feet, and in that one respect and the agricultural possibilities created by a relatively mild climate the region is comparable to Solu rather than Khumbu. But whereas most Sherpa villages of Solu lie on the gentle slopes of broad valleys, those of the Lhomis cling to the hill-slopes high above the Arun gorge.

The principal Lhomi villages have Bhotia as well as Nepali names, and it is the latter which are entered on the Survey of India map (No. 72M). Thus Damdang is marked as Hatiar, Tangmoche as Chepua and Pangdok as Honggaon. Only Namocha and Chyamtang seem to have no alternative Nepali names.

The first Lhomi village I visited was Namocha, and the entry in my diary reflects my surprise to find among Bhotias of Eastern Nepal house-types reminiscent of the dwellings of the hill-tribes of the North East Frontier Agency of India:

'Namocha is a fairly large settlement, but looks more impressive from far away than at close quarters. The houses which stand at different levels, are for the most part built of wood and

wattle, and all have roofs made of bamboo mats. Some of the houses, and all the granaries stand partly on piles. There are a few houses with stone walls, constructed of flat pieces of stone laid one on top of the other without the use of mortar or a covering of plaster. There are no windows in these stone walls and it does not appear that they carry the roof or as great a part of the structure as do the stone walls of houses in Khumbu. Many of the houses are no better and no worse than the dwellings of such tribes as Daflas, Abors or Miris, and the open platforms in front of the entrance are very reminiscent of such tribal houses.'

In Tangmoche (S. I. Chepua\*) stone foundations take the place of piles. There all houses and granaries are constructed on a foundation of stone, but the upper structure is in most cases partly of wood. The most frequent type is a house with the long back wall and one side wall built of stone, the other side wall, which contains the entrance door, is made of wooden planks, and so is the front wall, with a gap as a crude window. About four-fifths of all houses have roofs of wattle-mats sown together with split bamboo, and tied with bamboo slivers to a framework of wooden poles which run along the house-walls or to wooden pegs projecting from the walls. About one-fifth of the houses are roofed with wooden planks weighed down by big stones. This is the universal type of roof among the Sherpas, and one may well ask why so efficient a method of covering roofs, though known to the Lhomi, is applied only to a minority of houses. The answer is probably that the cutting and transport of planks requires much greater effort than the plaiting of bamboo-mats.† Thus it would seem that most Lhomis are less willing than Sherpas to expend much energy for the sake of providing their houses with solid roofs, and the difference between the two populations in their attitude to housing explains perhaps the fact that the Sherpas of Khumbu have achieved a much higher level of material comfort even though they live in a much severer environment. The difference in standards of living is apparent at

\* Names in brackets with S.I. are those used on Survey of India maps.

† J. D. A. Stainton suggests in a personal communication that the Lhomis' use of bamboo mat roofs is due to the dearth of conifers in the forests of the upper Arun valley. The Sherpas' planks are all made of conifers, and Lhomis would have to go a long way to find any conifers. Bamboo is plentiful in the Arun valley.

first glance. Soon after my arrival in Tangmoche I wrote in my diary: 'What impresses one most – particularly when one enters a house – is the comparatively lower level of material culture in a country potentially so much richer than Khumbu. Here the people have two crops a year, grazing throughout all seasons, and some possibilities of trade with Tibet. Yet, the houses and their belongings are much inferior to those of the average Sherpas.'

Lhomis dress in a style which conforms basically to the Bhotia pattern, but is adjusted to the relatively warm climate of their habitat. Thus men and women usually go barefoot though they make and own boots of Tibetan type. While Tibetan and Sherpa women wear trousers and shifts which reach to the ankles, the shifts of Lhomi women reach only to the knees and they do not wear trousers. Many women have fairly valuable Tibetan silver ornaments and necklaces of amber and turquoise beads. They also wear small cloth caps often adorned with Indian silver coins.

Lhomi women weave cloth and multi-coloured apron-strips from wool brought from Tibet, and some women also make woven garters to be worn with boots. Apart from those locally produced textiles, Lhomis also use cotton cloth which they obtain in the bazaars of the middle-ranges.

The basis of Lhomi economy is agriculture, and villages are normally self-sufficient for food, and have a surplus of such products as potatoes for sale. Small quantities of rice are grown by the villagers of Chyamtang and Damdang who own some low-lying, sheltered fields, but most of the rice consumed by Lhomis is bought from their southern neighbours.

There are two agricultural seasons. Millet (*eleusine coracana*), the principal monsoon crop, is sown in specially manured seed beds in June and then planted out on terraced fields. The planting is done by labour gangs of up to thirty members. These gangs are known as *ngala*, a term which recalls the Sherpa term *ngalok*. But unlike the stable *ngalok* of the Sherpas, the labour gangs of the Lhomis are fluctuating groups based on casual arrangements for reciprocal cooperation. Another monsoon crop is maize, and this is harvested by the end of October.

The harvest of millet takes place in November, and the method of reaping is one which I observed among the Daffas of the Eastern Himalayas and among the Thakalis of Western Nepal. Women



with large baskets on their backs cut the millet ears with a small sickle and throw them over their shoulders into the basket. The men then mow the stalks with long sickle-like knives. As soon as a field, or even part of a field, has been reaped, cattle are allowed to graze on it.

After the millet harvest the fields round the village are ploughed up in preparation for the planting of potatoes. The Lhomis yoke pairs of bulls or bullocks to their light plough, and those men who own no plough-animals can borrow them from kinsmen or neighbours or hire them, paying a small fee. In 1957 the amount paid for one morning's use of a pair of plough-bullocks was R $\frac{1}{2}$ , which even then was a very modest rental.

On the higher slopes above the villages wheat and barley are grown as winter crops. The seed is sown in November, approximately at the same time as the millet is being harvested on the lower-lying fields. The technique of sowing is unusual. The seed grain is broadcast on the field only superficially cleared of the previous year's stubble, and early next morning, preferably before dawn, it is ploughed in. The wheat ripens in May and its harvest coincides roughly with the potato harvest.

Agricultural activities extend thus over a large part of the year, but unlike those of the Sherpas they are concentrated on land within easy reach of the villages, and hence there is no need for a system of periodic movements between settlements at different levels of altitude. There is as yet no shortage of land, and in the villages I visited I was told that there were no landless families.

The breeding of cattle is an integral part of the Lhomis' farming economy, but has not the same prestige-value as the ownership of yak among the Sherpas. Bulls and cows as well as bullocks required for ploughing are kept in and near the villages, but some Lhomis also own a few yak and yak-common cattle cross-breeds, and keep them on pastures situated at a higher level. There are no high-altitude settlements with solid houses comparable to the *yersa* of the Sherpas, but temporary shelters are put up where herdsman graze their animals. Hybrids resulting from the crossing of male yak and cows are bred and sold both to Tibetans and to the people of Walongchung.

Unlike the Sherpas the Lhomis set no value on dairy products, and the milking of cows, though not unknown, is not a general

practice. The meat of both ordinary cattle and yak is eaten, and there is no religious taboo on the killing of animals. Sheep are bred for the sake of both their meat and their wool, and most Lhomi households keep a few pigs. These are an important source of meat and are also sacrificed on ritual occasions.

The type of animal husbandry prevailing among the Lhomis seems to lie midway between that of the Sherpas and such tribal populations of North-East India as Daflas, who relish both beef and pork but make no use of dairy products.

Another phenomenon reminiscent of those tribes is the importance of hunting, a pursuit shunned by such devout Buddhists as the Sherpas. The Lhomis, who hunt with bow and arrow, usually go out in groups. Before setting out they sacrifice a cock and all the hunters partake of it. Their strategy is to beat such game as deer, wild goat and pig towards a line of hunters, but wild boars are also trapped in pits and wild sheep are sometimes caught in noose-traps. When an animal has been killed, it is skinned, and dismembered. The hunters then place the head and legs on the animal's skin and roast some of its liver. The leader of the hunt then burns some incense and offers the liver to the god and goddess of the chase. This ritual clearly sets the Lhomis apart from Sherpas and other Buddhist populations of the Himalayas, and links them with the tribal populations of the regions east of Bhutan.

Trade plays only a minor rôle in the economy of the Lhomis. Unlike the Sherpas who have to supplement their supply of grain by barter and purchase, the Lhomis are self-sufficient for the bulk of their food. For wool and woollen cloth, on the other hand, they used to depend on imports from Tibet, and Tibetan petty traders also brought salt, boots and carpets to the Lhomi villages. Salt and woollen goods were mainly for local consumption, but most carpets found their way to the markets of the middle-ranges and even the Dharan. In exchange for these goods the Lhomis gave some of their own agricultural produce as well as rice, which they themselves had bought from the people of the lower-lying villages to the south. From there they also bought vegetable dyes for resale to Tibetans.

The main trade contact of the Lhomis of Tangmoche (S. I. Chepua) was with the Tibetan village of Kudo, some fifteen miles to the north-west as the crow flies, and relatively easily accessible

by a route leading across the Rakha La, a pass of 16,254 feet. Kudo is a small village of only some twenty-five houses, and the volume of trade can never have been substantial. In 1957 Indian rupee coins were the only currency used in this trade, for the Lhomi did not accept Tibetan or Chinese currency, and Nepalese rupees were at that time not commonly used in trade deals with Tibetans.

The Lhomi villages of Pangbok (S. I. Hatiar) and Honggaon had their Tibetan trade contacts with Kharta Shika, a larger settlement some fifteen miles inside Tibet and accessible by a route via the Ponti La. The number of Tibetans who used to travel by that route to Honggaon was much larger than that of the Kudo people who visited Tangmoche. Yet, neither of these routes ever carried a flow of traffic comparable to that between Khumbu and the Tibetan district of Tingri. For whereas Namche Bazar and Tingri were stations on an important route for long distance trade between Nepal and Tibet, the exchange of goods between Lhomis and their Tibetan neighbours was probably always of the nature of a small-scale barter trade between two groups of subsistence farmers.

The reason for this situation must be sought in the geography of the Arun region and in the character of the Lhomis who evince none of the enterprise and ambition of the Sherpa traders. Anyone who has struggled across the broken terrain to either side of the Arun river, will appreciate the obstacles in the way of developing a trade-route linking the Lhomi villages with the markets of the middle-ranges of Eastern Nepal. The Lhomis, moreover, are capable of meeting nearly all their needs by the farming of their land, and have few incentives to exert themselves unduly in the sphere of trade. The nature of the adjoining district of Tibet may also be a factor which impeded the growth of a more rigorous trade. And it seems probable that the economic and cultural backwater on the upper Arun adjoins an equally backward part of Tibet.

The abundance of religious monuments such as *chorten* and *mani*-walls in the vicinity of most Lhomi villages suggests that one time in the not too distant past Buddhism had a firm base among the Lhomis. Today most of the monuments are in a very poor state of repair, and no major structures seem to have been put up for several generations. According to local traditions the whole area as far south as Hedanga on the confluence of the Arun and

Wabak used to belong to the domain of the rulers of Sikkim, and the Lhomis believe that the Dendzung Raja, as they call the ruler of Sikkim, ordered the local people to build *chorten* and *mani*-walls in lieu of revenue. Nowadays only some minor *chorten* known as *pukhung* are built as memorials for deceased kinsmen.

The influence of Sikkim ended around 1775 when the Gorkhas extended their rule eastwards as far as the present border between Nepal and Sikkim. It would seem that from that time onwards Buddhism declined in the region of the upper Arun. The cause for this decline is not clearly discernible. There was no active discouragement of Buddhist practice by the new régime, which in any case exerted very little control over the outlying border-areas, and indeed religious institutions continued to receive official support. Above the village of Tangmoche there lies a small settlement which enjoys the privilege of being allowed to spend the total of its land-revenue, assessed in millet and wheat, on the maintenance of its temple (*gompa*). Despite this support the temple was in 1957 in a state of advanced dilapidation, and the lama holding the hereditary position of guardian of the *gompa* did not even perform the obligatory daily service, though a monthly rite was held on the tenth day of every lunar month. This settlement, known simply as Gompa, was a small Buddhist oasis in a region characterized by a syncretic religion of Buddhist and pagan elements. In this settlement no animal was allowed to be killed, and if any inhabitant wanted to sacrifice a pig or other animals, he had to take it outside the village and employ a man from another settlement to slaughter it.

Throughout all the other Lhomi villages blood sacrifices, incompatible with orthodox Buddhism, are widely practised and form an essential part of such agricultural rites as sowing and harvesting. Curing rites also involve the sacrifice of pigs or fowls. The priests performing such sacrifices are spirit-media comparable to the *lhawa* of Khumbu, and it seems that there is no conflict between them and the lamas who follow Buddhist practice. Indeed in Tangmoche there lived a man who combined the function of lama and spirit-medium and even possessed two different ceremonial garments appropriate to the two rôles. However, those priests who are also lamas do not kill the sacrificial animal with their own hands.

While the cult involving the sacrifice of pigs, sheep and fowls is undoubtedly an element of an indigenous and probably pre-Buddhist religion, Buddhist practice depended always on inspiration from Tibet and at times also from Sikkim. As late as 1957 the Lhomis maintained contacts with Tibetan monasteries, and most of the lamas, though not of great learning, had received some instruction in Tibet. The severance of links with Tibet following the Chinese occupation of the country, will undoubtedly have a deleterious influence on the standards of Buddhist practice and doctrine among the Lhomis. Unlike the Sherpas whose local Buddhist institutions are sufficiently firmly established to stand at least for a time on their own, isolation from the Tibetan fountainhead of teaching may well mean the rapid erosion of all Buddhist ideas and the increasing reassertion of the indigenous cults associated with animal-sacrifices.

Only a brief description of the Lhomis' social organization can be given in this context. The Lhomis consider themselves as a separate group distinct from Sherpas, and the Bhotias of Ritak, Thudam and Walongchung. They speak a Tibetan dialect and believe that their ancestors came from Tibet and settled in their present habitat. Their society is divided into a number of patrilineal, exogamous-named clans, and in this respect they resemble the Sherpas and differ from most Tibetan populations who have no named clans. Some of the clans are subdivided, and even these segments are named and occur in more than one village. The segments are not necessarily the result of fission, but may also have arisen through a process of agglomeration. Thus in Tangmoche there is a clan called Nupa, and this is subdivided into three segments called Hamo, Tongde and Yugok. It is said that the Hamo people are the descendants of the first settlers in Tangmoche, while the Tongde came from Kochen Gompa in Tibet, and the Yugok were originally Drokpa and also came from Tibet. The story is that these groups decided to 'live like brothers' and jointly formed the Nupa clan. Such traditions reflect the heterogeneous composition of the Lhomis, for which there is evidence also in their religion and material equipment, which combines elements from different cultural spheres.

Unlike Sherpas and Tibetans as well as their immediate neighbours in Ritak and Thudam, Lhomis do not practise polyandry,

but polygyny is permitted though not very common. As among all Bhotia groups women enjoy considerable freedom of action. Some marriages are concluded without any ceremonial and a girl may of her own will enter a man's house and live with him as his wife without any loss in status. Unlike Sherpa widows a Lhomí woman has no obligation towards the brothers of her deceased husband but may marry again without obtaining a formal separation from her affinal kinsmen. If there is mutual attraction she may, however, marry her husband's younger though not his elder brother.

The traditional village administration is based on a system of hereditary headmen recognized by government and known as *gova*. Among their functions is the supervision of the collection of revenue and the settlement of disputes. Below each *gova*, who correspond roughly to the Sherpa *gembu*, are several *pembu*, each with a number of clients from whom he collects the revenue. The *gova* have the right to two days' free labour from all the households within their jurisdiction, and each *pembu* is given three days' free labour from those whose revenue he collects. As in Khumbu and other parts of Nepal, this system of free labour is likely to have been abolished, and the administration of hereditary headmen will have been replaced by the newly introduced *panchayat*-system.

The fact that before this modern development there had been considerable political stability in the region of the upper Arun is demonstrated by a number of documents in the possession of Lhomí *gova*. Thus the *gova* of Chyamtang showed me a document issued in 1796 by the district officer of Chainpur, which confirmed his ancestor's position of *gova*. Another document of the year 1809 addressed to Gova Juhyaching laid down the boundaries of his jurisdiction and fixed the rate of revenue to be collected, namely R3 per house from *kipat*-holders.\* It also authorized the *gova* to retain for himself all fines, except those paid in punishment of the five principal crimes (i.e. murder, rape, etc.). The document also instructed the *gova* to try to increase the number of settlers in his jurisdiction.

\* *Kipat* is a form of communal land tenure widespread in Eastern Nepal. For a detailed description see Mahesh C. Regmi, *Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal*, Vol. III, *The Jagir, Rakam and Kipat Tenure Systems*. Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley 1965.

It thus appears that there was official encouragement for the attraction of new settlers, and the slow influx of Tibetans into the border areas must be viewed in this context. We have seen that some Lhomi sub-clans have the tradition of being descended from Tibetan settlers, but unlike Khumbu where there are many Tibetans, locally known as 'Khambas', who settled in Sherpa villages within living memory, the upper Arun has not recently attracted new immigrants. Traders used to come and go and a few women from neighbouring Tibetan villages came as seasonal workers and worked for wages in Lhomi houses. However, I encountered no Tibetan who had permanently settled among the Lhomis.

The Sherpas who had accompanied me to the Arun region found it difficult to communicate with the Lhomis by using their own language or the Tibetan they were familiar with, and had to use Nepali in order to make themselves understood. This was surprising, for the dialects of most Bhotia border people are mutually comprehensible and it is rare that members of two Bhotia groups have to resort to Nepali as a means of communication. The Lhomis clearly speak a language very different from standard Tibetan and it would not be surprising if linguistic research in this area of great cultural and ethnic diversity revealed that this dialect contains elements which cannot be derived from the language of the adjoining regions of Tibet.

Immediately to the north-east of the Lhomi country lies a small group of villages, including Ritak and Thudam, whose inhabitants conform both culturally and linguistically much more closely to the Tibetan pattern. There Sherpas can communicate easily without having to use Nepali as a *lingua franca* and a few Tibetans from nearby villages across the border have settled among the local population. The term used for the people of this group by their neighbours is Nawa, but the same word is also the name of one particular clan occurring in Ritak.

The affinities of the Nawas to the Sherpas are not only linguistic. Several of the clan names, such as Thaktu, Chiawa and, indeed, Nawa, are identical to those of Sherpa clans, and in some villages there are even people who can trace their descent to Sherpas who migrated there from Solu. In appearance and dress too the Nawas resemble Sherpas and Tibetans. Unlike Lhomi women, those of

the Nawa villages wear long shifts reaching to their ankles, and the men too dress more or less like Sherpas.

Their houses are on the whole bigger and more solidly built than those of most Lhomis. In Ritak each stands on a broad terrace carved out of the hill-side. Stone walls form an understructure on which the floor containing all the living quarters rests. This upper part of the house is built of stout, broad planks and in front there is a covered veranda. Access to the veranda is by several stone steps and from the veranda one enters first a store-room and then, by way of a door, the main living-room containing a hearth. All the rooms are very dark and there is not much furniture, a feature which contrasts with the good furnishings of many Sherpa houses. There are a few gaps in the wall, but proper windows seem to be unknown.

The average altitude of these Nawa villages is about 10,000 feet, and there is very much less emphasis on agriculture than in the climatically more favoured Lhomi villages. While in Ritak some millet, barley and wheat are grown Thudam has no land suitable for cultivation within its borders, and most villagers cultivate land rented from Lhomis of Chyamtang. But both Ritak and Thudam supplement their own harvest by purchasing millet, maize and rice from Tangmoche and other Lhomi villages. In exchange they used to give mainly salt, which they obtained from Tibetans.

The Nawas depend to a greater extent on animal husbandry than their Lhomi neighbours. The higher altitude of their villages and the proximity of the extensive pastures on the slopes of Lum-basumba Himal favour the keeping of large herds of yak and in this respect Nawa economy approximates the Sherpa pattern. Yet there are significant differences. Unlike the Sherpas the Nawas keep pigs and fowls, as well as substantial numbers of sheep and goat. The people of Ritak and Thudam do not breed yak-common cattle hybrids but buy small male cross-breeds from Khambalung, a region to the east accessible via Walongchung. As long as trade with Tibet was unimpeded they sometimes sold young female yak to Tibet, but never bought any cattle from their Tibetan neighbours.

The transactions of individual traders seem to have been very similar to those of minor Sherpa merchants. A man of Thaktu



clan of Ritak told me that his trading journeys ranged from Chainpur, a small market town in the Rai country, twenty-six miles south of Ritak, to Shigatse in Tibet. He bought paper made by Tamangs of Sibrung in the Arun valley and sold it in Shigatse. Every year he went with pack-yak to Shigatse, a journey which took him twenty days. On these trips he did not carry grain but in addition to Nepalese paper he carried madder and other dyes as well as ink. The latter he bought in Lungtö, a village on the Arun, there called Pung-chu, immediately north of the Tibetan border. The people of Lungtö produce ink from soot made by burning pine-wood. In Sar, a village inside Tibet some thirty-five miles north-east of Ritak, he sold paper, ink and dyes, and bought salt, wool and woollen cloth. Much of the salt was sold to Rais and other Nepalese of the middle-ranges. He also engaged in the export of *sangde*-wood, which Tibetans use as a substitute for tea. Shavings of this wood, which has an aromatic flavour, are boiled and give the water some taste and a reddish colour. Only very poor people use this surrogate, but it is nevertheless worth a trader's while to buy blocks of *sangde* in Chainpur, and to transport them to Tibet when he is going there with empty pack-yak, which will be needed to bring back loads of salt. The price obtained was about Rs 1 for 10 lbs.

A high degree of economic specialization has been forced upon the village of Thudam. There is no land suitable for cultivation inside the tract owned by this community of fourteen households settled in a high valley on the route between the Arun and the Tamur valley. Twelve of the families cultivate some lower-lying land on the left bank of the Arun, which belongs to Lhomis of Chyamtang, and pay an annual rental, but the main sources of income are the breeding of yak and the production and sale of wood-pulp made from juniper trees. The village lies amid juniper forest and the aromatic wood is made into pulp, which Tibetans utilize for the production of incense.

The pulping is done with simple water-driven machines. A stream of water, diverted from the main river, is channelled through an open wooden duct inclined about 45° and drives a water-wheel. Attached to its axle is a rough crank-shaft, the end of which fits into a hole in a block of juniper wood. Through the

action of wheel and shaft this block is pushed to and fro over a stone grinding surface and the wooden flakes rubbed off by this process settle as a layer of reddish pulp in the trough containing the grinding stone. A thin current of water is led through a bamboo to provide continuous lubrication for the crank-shaft and grinding stone. Once the block of juniper wood has been attached to the crank-shaft the mill requires no attention. One block of wood, yielding one basket of pulp (worth R2 in 1957) can be reduced to pulp during a day, and one during the night. All Thudam families operated such mills and their annual earnings used to be R400-500. The pulp is spread out to dry on mats and on flat rocks, and when I visited Thudam in November 1957, verandahs and homes were full of heaps of powdered pulp and large balls made of it. The dried pulp is very light and a man could carry a large sack, then worth R10.

At that time Tibetans with caravans of yak were coming to Thudam to purchase the juniper pulp which is an important ingredient of the incense used in Buddhist ritual. While small-scale border trade in salt and wool may continue even now, the market for Thudam's juniper pulp will have shrunk and the loss to the small community must be considerable.

Thudam people used to purchase wool in Tibet, and many of the women were engaged in spinning and weaving. The cloth produced was mainly of the natural greyish colour, but some women dyed the wool in various colours and wove striped aprons of the usual Sherpa and Tibetan pattern.

Similarities between Sherpas and the people of this group extend beyond the economic sphere. Unlike Lhomis the people of Ritak and Thudam practise polyandry. Co-husbands should be brothers, but while among the Sherpas both husbands must be included in the wedding ceremony, Nawa custom permits a younger brother to have sexual access to his elder brother's wife even if he did not participate in the wedding. A man's brother has a right to his widow and if she marries someone else she must compensate her first husband's brother for the expenses his family incurred in her first wedding. Unlike Tibetans, Nawas do not countenance the marriage of father and son to the same woman. The men I spoke to were well aware of the Tibet practice, how-

ever, and they told me that in Kudo, a village just beyond the Tibetan border, where the same language is spoken as in Thudam and where the inhabitants intermarry with the Nawa people living in Nepal, father and sons as well as brothers' sons may live with one wife. They also mentioned a woman with five husbands then living in Kudo and another woman with the record number of seven husbands resident in the Tibetan village of Guma. Although the border between Tibet and Nepal cuts there through populations speaking the same language and sharing by and large the same culture, the people south of the border seem to have made some adjustment to their marriage customs and extreme forms of polyandry such as are common in Tibet do not prevail within the frontiers of Nepal.

There is a slight difference in the dialects of Ritak and Thudam, but my informants of the latter village told me that the identical language is spoken in Thudam, Topke Gola, Walongchung and the Tibetan villages of Kudo and Sar.

Whereas both the Lhomi region in the upper Arun valley and such Nawa villages as Ritak and Thudam are backwaters in so far as trade is concerned, a major trade route runs through the area lying to the east. There the village of Walongchung acted as an entrepôt for the trade between Tibet and Eastern Nepal comparable in its importance with Namche Bazar in Khumbu and Tukche in Western Nepal.

To understand the rôle of the trade-route which follows the Tamur valley and leads through Walongchung and across the Tipta La to the Tibetan village of Sar, we must consider the history of the region.

When King Prithvi Narayan Shah had established Gorkha rule over Nepal he had the ambition to capture the greater part of the trade between India and Tibet and develop Kathmandu as the main centre of trans-Himalayan trade. To achieve this aim, he had to close alternative trade-routes and prevent the opening of new routes through areas not under his control. In pursuance of this policy he launched in 1770-1 a campaign against the Limbu region and the area then controlled by Sikkim in what is now Eastern Nepal. Until that time the influence of Sikkim had extended as far west as the Arun, and in some places such as the Lhomi villages, even beyond that river. The route through Walongchung lay clearly within the Sikkimese sphere. Prithvi Narayan Shah first

gained control of the southern part of this route by occupying the Morang district of the Terai and then extended his campaign into the Limbu country. This brought him into conflict with Sikkim which was then also under pressure on its frontier with Bhutan. At the end of several years campaigning and tension in 1775 Nepal and Sikkim concluded an agreement which gave Nepal control of the territory east of the Arun as far as the present boundary between the two states.\* Thus the Gorkha ruler had attained his objective and the route from the Terai through the Limbu country to Walongchung came under his control.

The degree of this control varied, however, with the fluctuations of the power of the Nepalese kings, and from an account of Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the first – and for a long time, the last – British traveller to visit Walongchung it appears that in 1850 the inhabitants of the northern borderlands still enjoyed a good deal of autonomy. His description of the Bhotias of the Walongchung region deserves to be quoted:

‘The inhabitants of these frontier districts belong to two very different tribes [Lhomis and Nawas?], but all are alike called Bhoteas (from Bhote, the proper name of Tibet), and have for many centuries been located in what is – in climate and natural features – a neutral ground between dry Tibet proper, and the wet Himalayan gorges. . . . In all respects of appearance, religion, manners, customs and language they are Tibetans and Lama Boodhists, but they pay tax to the Nepal and Sikkim Rajahs, to whom they render immense service by keeping up and facilitating the trade in salt, wool, musk, etc., which could hardly be conducted without their cooperation. They levy a small tax on all imports and trade a little on their own account, but are generally poor and very indolent. In their alpine summer quarters they grow scanty crops of wheat, barley, turnips and radishes; and at their winter quarters, as at Loongtoong, a village some 9 miles south of Walongchung, the better classes cultivate fine crops of buckwheat, millet, spinach, etc., though seldom enough for their support, as in spring they are obliged to buy rice from the inhabitants of the lower regions. Equally

\* For details of the political events see Leo E. Rose, *Nepal Strategy for Survival*, Berkeley 1971, pp. 27–33.

dependent on Nepal and Tibet, they naturally hold themselves independent of both; and I found that my roving commission from the Nepal Rajah was not respected, and the guard of Ghorkas held very cheap. . . . In the first place, the Guobah [i.e. *gova*, headman of Walongchung] disputed the Nepal Rajah's authority to pass me through his dominions; and besides the natural jealousy of these people when intruded upon, they have very good reasons for concealing the amount of revenue they raise from their position, and for keeping up the delusion that they alone can endure the excessive climate of these regions, or undergo the hardships and toil of the salt trade.\*

From this account of a perceptive observer it appears that some 120 years ago the position of the Bhotias of the upper Tamur valley was much the same as I found it in the 1950s. No doubt by that time they had come to acknowledge the authority of the government of Nepal but their rôle as middlemen in the trade between India and Tibet had remained unchanged. The headman of Walongchung, moreover, exerted an influence over the smaller villages of the region which may stem from a time when they were virtually independent chieftains. Thus they had forbidden the people of Thudam to sell their butter directly to Tibetans, and insisted on purchasing the entire output at a fixed price, presumably largely for resale to Tibet at a large profit.

Hooker mentions that on his way up the Tamur valley he 'daily passed parties of ten or a dozen Tibetans, on their way to Mywa Guola [a market not far from the present Taplejung] laden with salt'.† A few lines earlier he spoke of a 'change in the population [which] accompanies that in the natural features of the country, Tibetans replacing the Limboos and Khass-tribes of Nepal, who inhabit the lower region', and this suggests that the people carrying salt whom he met on his way north may well have been Bhotias of Walongchung. This is indeed probable, for Walongchung's importance lay in its role of entrepôt, where the goods brought by yak caravans from Tibet were transferred on to the backs of porters for the onward journey to the south.

\* Sir John Dalton Hooker, *Himalayan Journals or Notes of a Naturalist in Bengal, the Sikkim and Nepal Himalayas, the Khasia mountains, etc.*, 2nd edition, London 1905, pp. 149-51.

† *op. cit.*, p. 141.

There are about a dozen Bhotia villages in the valley of the Tamur river and along the course of its two tributaries Yangma and Thapabu. The largest of these settlements is Walongchung, locally often referred to as Walong. Hooker described the place as 'a populous village of large and good painted houses, ornamented with hundreds of long poles and vertical flags, looking like the fleet of some foreign port', and this description as well as his estimate of the number of houses – about one hundred – still applied 120 years later. The site of the settlement had neither increased nor diminished, and the style of the houses had remained unchanged. Walongchung has the character of a small town rather than of a village. The houses stand in broad, paved streets connected by small lanes and there is hardly a vegetable plot or even a tree to counteract the impression of an urban settlement. Some rivulets running through the streets serve as natural drains, and large numbers of pigs roaming the streets act as scavengers. The houses, built of stone and wooden planks, are much more spacious than those of any other Bhotia community in the region of Arun and Tamur. Some compare favourably even with most Sherpa houses of Khumbu, both in size and the luxurious furnishings. There are large numbers of *mani*-walls and rows of attractively painted square houses containing water-driven prayer-wheels. On a ledge above the village stands a large Buddhist *gompa* and clinging to the hill-slope are several small houses where lamas stay at the time of festivals and extended ceremonies. With the exception of the verger, they normally live in the village.

On the outskirts of the village there are a few kitchen gardens and some enclosed pastures for the pack-animals of visiting traders. The people of Walongchung themselves also keep yak, but apart from their small vegetable plots they have no cultivation, and depend entirely on food supplies purchased from other populations, such as the Limbus of the lower-lying country to the south.

Yak and cross-breeds are kept mainly as pack-animals, and few of the inhabitants of Walongchung engage in animal husbandry as their main economic enterprise. Trading used to be the principal occupation of nearly all of the villagers, and the present obstacles to the trade with Tibet must have affected the people of Walongchung even more severely than the Sherpas of Khumbu. For many of the men of Walongchung were long-distance traders who drew large

profits from their business, and had contacts not only in the nearby Tibetan villages such as Kudo and Sar but also in such distant towns as Shigatse and Lhasa. Their southern trade connections were strongest along the route through Taplejung, Tehra Tum, Dhankuta, Dharan and Biratnagar, and the bigger merchants sometimes even visited Calcutta, Delhi or Bombay.

Judging from the affluence of the richest traders reflected in the furnishings of their large houses, and their ability to acquire as early as 1957 such foreign commodities as battery-powered radios, the trade through Walongchung must have been even more profitable than that through Khumbu. This may have been due to the fact that the route along the Tamur valley and across the Tipta La is easier than the one through the valley of the Dudh Kosi and across the Nangpa La, used by Sherpa traders. The flow of goods through Walongchung included not only the usual exports to Tibet such as grain, textiles, sugar, cigarettes and matches, but also a variety of commodities from overseas countries in demand among wealthy Tibetans. In front of the homes of traders one could watch yak being loaded with bags and boxes bearing a multitude of different imprints. Thus a large number of boxes containing tinned milk made in Denmark were loaded on to yak bound for Shigatse where the sweetened milk was to be sold as a luxury food. All these goods had reached the Indo-Nepal border by rail and Dharan by truck. From there they were transported by porters to Walongchung and then transferred to yak. The Tibetan importers paid for larger deliveries by cheques on Calcutta banks, a way the traders preferred because it saved them from the danger of being robbed. Caravans, and particularly traders carrying cash, were exposed to the attacks of dacoits both inside Tibet and in the border area on the Nepalese side of the frontier. Only a few months before my visit two Walongchung traders were murdered there by robbers, and some years previously six Walongchung men had lost their lives in similar circumstances in Tibet. Such incidents remind one that the men engaged in this long-distance trade needed not only business acumen but also courage and determination in the face of many hazards. The goods brought from Tibet were mainly salt, wool and woollen cloth, but by 1957 the trade in salt had already diminished because Indian salt was penetrating as far north as Taplejung, where it was cheaper than the Tibetan salt

carried across the high passes. It was probably this fact which forced Tibetan importers to pay for some goods in money. At that time several currencies were used in this trade, and the traders of Walongchung had stocks of Tibetan paper money, Chinese silver *dayang*, and Indian currency, both bank notes and coins.

Their contacts with the outside world were then in the process of taking on yet another dimension. While most traders were literate in Tibetan and some in Nepali, their links with India made a knowledge of English desirable, and four sons of prominent families were then staying in missionary schools in Darjeeling.

The relative complexity of the trading economy of Walongchung is matched by a hierarchical division of society, which resembles the stratification of Tibetan society. There are three classes in Walongchung known as Shiva, Pheza and Longme. The Shiva people, who are supposed to have been the first settlers, form the highest class and it is they who furnish all office-bearers, such as the hereditary headmen. There are seven named original lineages among the Shiva, and there are some members of these seven lineages settled in Darjeeling and Gangtok. The Pheza who now constitute the majority of the people of Walongchung, are the descendants of more recent immigrants from Tibet. The wealthy Shiva families do not intermarry with Pheza but among the poorer villagers there is some intermarriage between Shiva and Pheza. It is said that until some time ago Shiva and Pheza refrained from drinking out of the same cup – a sign of social equality – but that nowadays they have started to ignore this barrier. Originally Shiva and Pheza inhabited different quarters in Walongchung, but ever since a great fire had destroyed much of the village the houses of the two classes are interspersed.

The majority of the householders belong to the Pheza class and they are eligible for ceremonial offices to which villagers of the two upper classes are appointed in turn. Thus every year two *niepa* are elected and entrusted with the arrangements for all public ceremonies and rites to be held during the following twelve months. The people of Longme class, whose status compares to that of the *khamendeu* among Sherpas, stand lowest in the social scale, are generally poor and work as porters and labourers for the wealthier villagers. The members of the higher classes refuse to share drinking vessels with Longme, but there is no ban on the eating of



food prepared by a man or woman of lower rank. Sexual relations between the classes are forbidden, however, and transgressors of this taboo have to undergo a ceremony of purification.

The marriage pattern used to be the same as in the adjoining parts of Tibet, but it is said that around 1900 Nepalese officials came to Walongchung and forbade the practice of polyandry, and that since then marriages have been monogamous. Polyandry is certainly not a practice permitted by Nepalese law, though in many parts of the kingdom it is tolerated. It would seem that in Walongchung, lying on an important trade-route and at some time site of a customs' post, the influence of high-caste Hindu officials was strong enough to bring about a change in the traditional marriage pattern.

The position of headmen (*gova*) is hereditary in a Shiva family of a lineage known as Ukiyewa, which in 1957 was represented by sixteen houses. The title is applied not only to the senior man of that lineage but also to other prominent members of his lineage. The authority of the *gova* of Walongchung extends to the villages of Yangma and Lungthung, and his rôle in 1957 was very much the same as that described by Hooker in 1850 in the following words:

'The Guobah of Wallanchoon [sic] overtook us on the road; on his way . . . to collect the revenues of Yangma. He owns five considerable villages, and is said to pay a tax of 6,000 rupees (£600) to the Rajah of Nepal: this is no doubt a great exaggeration, but the revenues of such a position, near a pass frequented almost throughout the year, must be considerable. Every yak going and coming is said to pay 1s. and every horse 4s.; cattle, sheep, ponies, land and wool are all taxed; he exports also quantities of timber to Tibet, and various articles from the plains of India.' (op. cit. p. 160.)

It thus appears that the same family had retained a position of authority over a period of at least 100 years and there is every reason to assume that the institution of *gova*, comparable presumably to that of *gembu* in Khumbu, dates from the time when Bhotias first established themselves in the upper Tamur valley and exerted control over the trade. Their position was similar to that of the Thakali *subba* in the Kali Gandaki valley which will be described in Chapter 6.

Yet, there is a difference. The Thakalis are not of Tibetan stock even though influenced by Tibetan culture while the *gova* family of Walongchung is basically Tibetan. Several men had married Tibetan wives and in 1957 one of the sons of the senior *gova* lived permanently in Shigatse and looked after his father's business interests in Tibet.

Before the institution of the *panchayat* system throughout Nepal, the *gova* of Walongchung used to collect the government revenue, in the same way as the Sherpa *pembu*, and to settle disputes. In his official work he was helped by a dignitary known as *bichari*. The position of *bichari* was hereditary in a lineage represented by five houses, and it seems that this official was not merely an assistant of the *gova*, but that in certain spheres he exerted influence in his personal capacity. Thus in 1957 the *bichari* of Walongchung held the position of *pembu* of Thudam, and it was said that his father had wrested this function from the *gova* of the Lhomi village of Pangbok (Hatiar).

While Walongchung depended for its prosperity entirely on trade, other villages of the area, namely Yangma, Lungthung, Lelep and Gunsu, have some cultivable land on which barley, wheat and potatoes are grown. Yak as well as cross-breeds are kept in these villages. Men of Lungthung occasionally travelled to Solu and there bought male *dzo* which they then brought to the Tamur valley via Chainpur. The division of society into Shiva, Pheza and Longme extends also to these villages.

Walongchung bears all the outward signs of a flourishing centre of Buddhist culture. There is a large and lavishly furnished *gompa*, and the village is studded with *chorten*, *mani*-walls and prayer-wheels. According to local tradition the *gompa* was founded by Yosa Dorje, a Drukpa lama, but the lamas who lived in Walongchung in 1957 belonged to the Nyingmapa sect. Most of them had been trained in Tibetan monasteries, but none seemed to possess great spiritual authority and all but two were married and lived with their families in the village. Yet the Bhotias of the Tamur region represent a much more orthodox pattern of Buddhist culture than any of the Lhomi communities of the Arun valley. The main seasonal rites and festivals are performed as in Tibet or in Khumbu, and individuals commission various rituals to gain merit or to honour their deceased relatives. Thus there is a great display of



Lhomi woman of Chepua

Lhomi boy of Chepua





The village of Walongchung  
Gateway and houses in Walongchung

wealth at the memorial feasts (*gyewa*) performed within forty-nine days of a person's death. While the intention and the recitation of texts is the same as in Khumbu, the distribution of food and gifts follows a slightly different pattern and brings out social distinctions. Thus the donor of the memorial feast sends gifts of rice, meat, beer and liquor to all individual Shiva houses, but people of Pheza and Longme class must come to the donor's house to fetch the food or to eat it there. Only kinsmen of the deceased come from other villages, and hence memorial feasts are not the occasion of large gatherings of people from several villages as they are in Khumbu.

Though settled in the Tamur valley for several centuries the Bhotias of Walongchung and the adjacent villages retained closer links with Tibet than any of the other Buddhist populations of Eastern Nepal. Not only did they trade extensively with Tibet, but the most prominent families freely intermarried with Tibetans of equal status. Socially the nearby boundary was of no consequence, and there was no built-in feature in the society of Walongchung which set immigrant Tibetans apart. The Sherpas too had many trading friends in Tibet, but business contacts were never the basis for marriage alliances. Tibetans had to settle in Khumbu and merge with the earlier 'Khamba' immigrants before they could expect to marry into Sherpa families. Even then there was no possibility of complete assimilation, for no one could become a member of one of the exogamous Sherpa clans and no one not the member of such a clan is considered a true Sherpa. The brevity of my stay in Walongchung did not permit a detailed study of the social system, but from the data I could collect it seems that there are no clearly defined exogamous patrilineal clans comparable to those of the Sherpas. The social order seems to be closer to the bilateral system of Tibet and frequent intermarriage with Tibetans tended to preserve this similarity. Socially and economically the trading community of Walongchung appears thus as a projection of Tibet rather than as a distinct ethnic group possessing an identity developed in Nepal and clearly distinguishable from that of the populations of the adjacent parts of Tibet.

Most of the information contained in this chapter was collected in 1957, and in the intervening years conditions in all of Nepal's border regions have undergone a radical change. Like the Sherpas and other Tibetan-speaking groups the Bhotias of Walongchung

have been adversely affected by political events in Tibet and the subsequent restrictions on trade. In addition to these developments there occurred a natural disaster which intensified the community's misfortune. A large landslide destroyed many of the houses of Walongchung, and while in 1957 I had counted 109 households, in 1972 only 40-45 houses were still inhabited.

Members of the family which had furnished the hereditary headman are now settled in Kathmandu, and it was from them that I obtained news of the present situation in Walongchung. Much of the trade with Tibet, which used to be the life-blood of the community has now dried up, and to make things worse, large numbers of armed Khambas fleeing from Tibet invaded the region, and endangered the life and property of the old inhabitants. They interfered with the small-scale trade which had been continuing and molested the wives of Bhotia men who had gone trading. As a result of these developments, many Bhotias and particularly the wealthy families, have left Walongchung. Some 40-50 families have settled in Darjeeling, and 3-4, including the *gova* family live now in Kathmandu. There is also a new settlement of Bhotias from Walongchung situated on an elevated plateau north of Dhankuta. It is known as Hile, and its houses are built in the same style as the local Limbu and Chetri houses and not in imitation of the houses of Walongchung. The Bhotias settled there live entirely on trade and so far have not acquired any land. But they no longer deal in salt and grain, but concentrate mainly on trade in cloth and other consumer goods.

In the village of Walongchung only poor people are left, and I was told that they are relatively better off than before because they can trade without being subjected to the competition of the wealthier merchants. Some salt is still being imported from Tibet. The Walongchung Bhotias go across the Tipta pass to a Tibetan village called Riu, and there they sell grain and some Tibetan-style clothes obtained from Kalimpong, and purchase salt and small quantities of wool. My informants spoke also of the continuation of the trade in cross-breeds which the Walongchung people purchase in Solu for about R200 per young animal and sell in Tibet for double that price. Among the valuables given by the Tibetans in exchange semi-precious stones and various ornaments were mentioned. It seems that such articles are still obtainable from indi-

vidual Tibetans and ultimately find their way to the tourist market in India and Kathmandu.

I inquired about the present situation in villages such as Thudam, and was told that no more juniper pulp was being produced because in Tibet there was no more demand for incense. The Thudam people now live by yak-breeding and some agriculture.

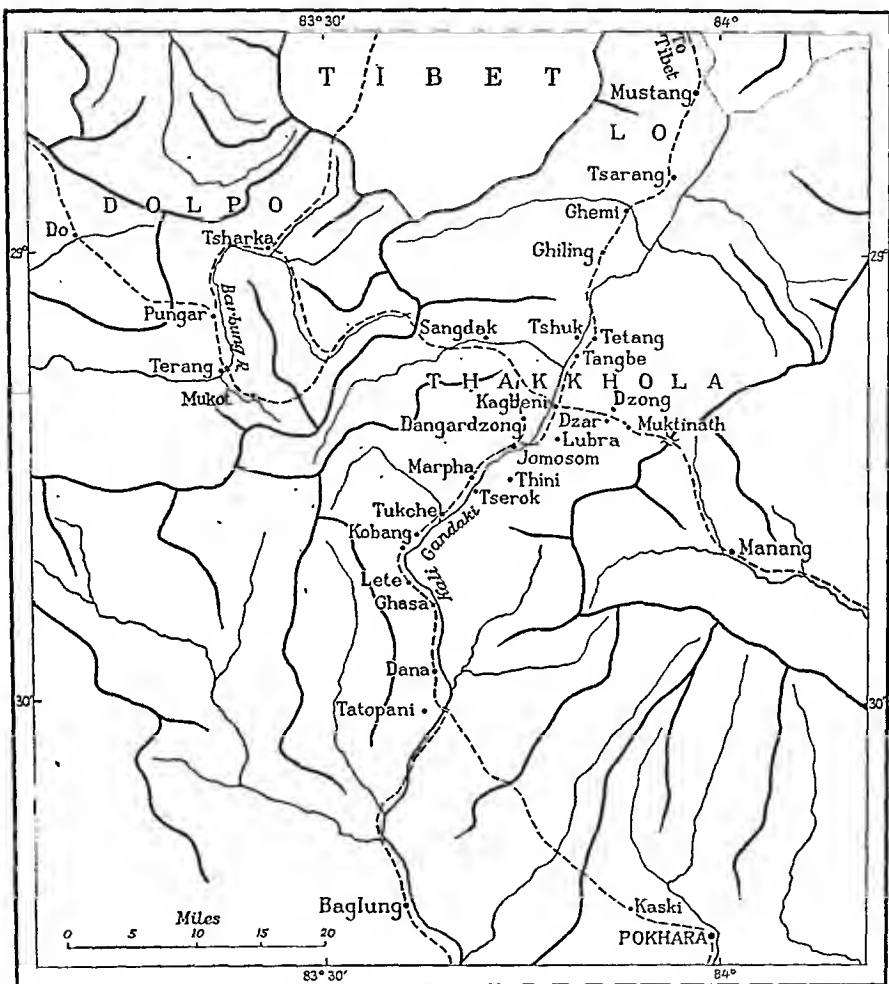
From the information provided by the Walongchung men now resident in Kathmandu it seems that the large-scale trade from which the wealth of the leading families had been derived has virtually come to an end, but that there remains some scope for a limited border trade. The foundations of Hile as a trading-centre of novel character as well as the move of rich Bhotias to Darjeeling and Kathmandu demonstrates the resilience and resourcefulness of a trading community long used to adjusting itself to fluctuations of the market as well as to shifts in the political balance.

## Highlanders of the Dhaulagiri Zone

All along Nepal's northern borders there are zones of high altitude inhabited by populations of Tibetan speech and Buddhist faith, who derive part of their subsistence from trans-Himalayan commerce. But just as in Eastern Nepal communities operating along the important trade-routes which pass through Namche Bazar and Walongchung are separated by a wide economic and cultural gap from the rustic inhabitants of such backwaters as the upper Arun valley, there are deep divisions between the various groups of Bhotias settled in the central and western regions of the country. The available ethnographic information on the Bhotias of the border areas is extremely uneven, and in the absence of reliable data such districts as Langtang and Nye-shang (Manangbhot) – areas still offering great scope for anthropological research – I shall confine myself to the discussion of ethnic groups of which I have first-hand knowledge.

Bhotia populations have been the main agents of trade along many trans-Himalayan routes in Eastern as well as Western Nepal, but there are two important arteries of commerce never monopolized by the high-altitude dwellers through whose territory they passed. One of these leads from Kathmandu along the Indravati, Sunkosi and Bhote Kosi rivers to the Kodari pass and thence to the Tibetan town of Kuti, and the other route links Kathmandu by way of Rasua Garhi with the Kyirong area of Tibet. Both these routes lead across passes of less than 14,000 feet, and the former has recently been transformed into a motorable road by which trucks can travel from Kathmandu to Shigatse and Lhasa. For centuries these relatively easy routes were used by Newar merchants, some 5,000 of whom lived in Tibet as late as the 1960s, and who controlled much of the trade between Kathmandu and the principal Tibetan cities. To the west of the Rasua-Garhi-Kyirong route was a minor trans-Himalayan track which led from Gorkha and Pokhara





via Thonje to Larkhya and the Gya La (18,379 feet), but this route was not practicable for laden pack animals. The main trade-route linking the towns of Pokhara and Baglung in the middle-ranges to Tibet follows the course of the Kali Gandaki river and enters Tibet by an easy pass north of the town of Mustang.

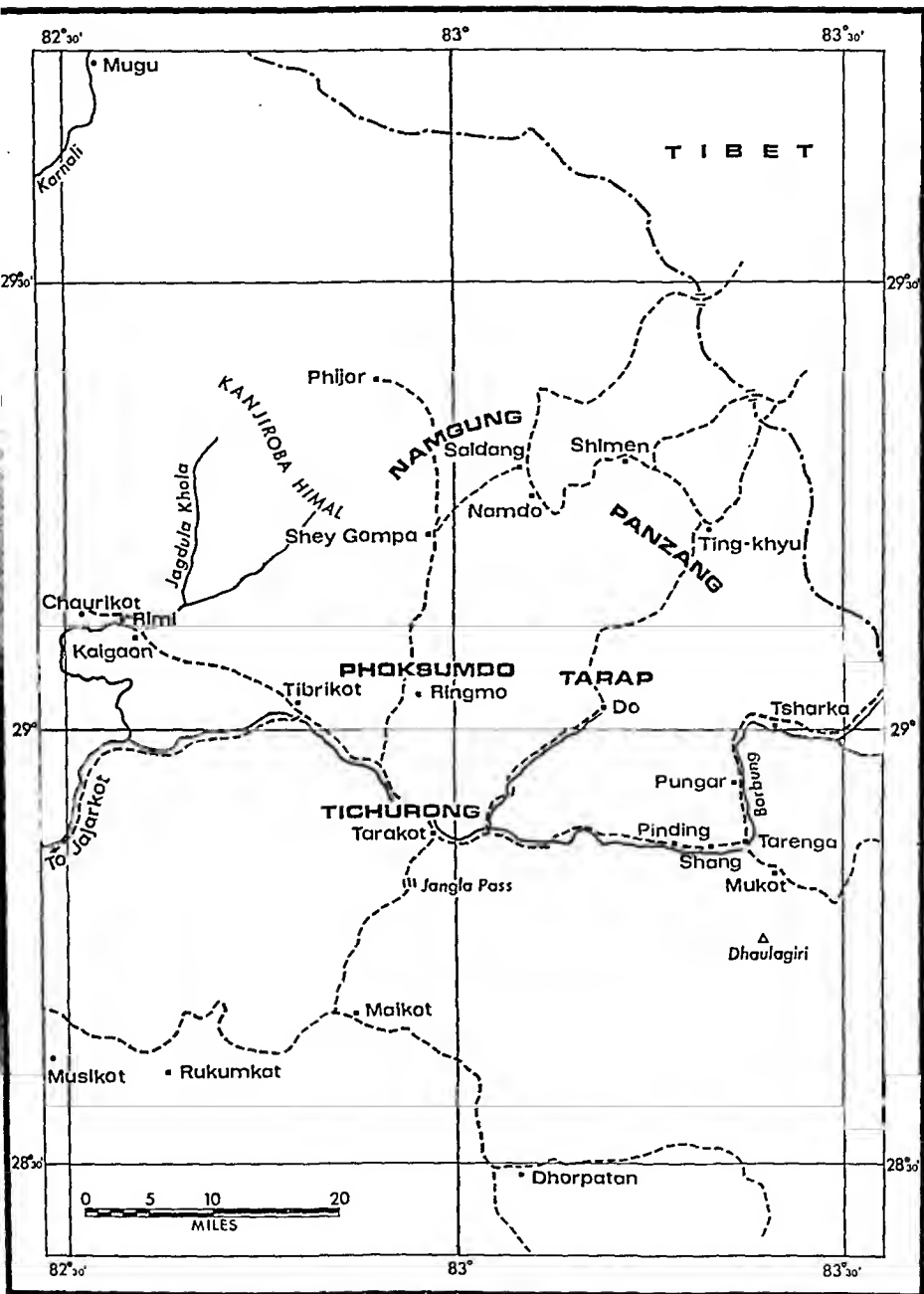
Several different populations have been involved in the flow of trade along this route, and each follows a distinct style of life. Here we shall consider the inhabitants of Thak Khola, Lo (Mustangbhot) and Dolpo.

The southern part of Thak Khola consists of a single valley hemmed in by the Annapurna range and the eastern slopes of Dhaulagiri, and lying at an average altitude of 7,500 feet. It is the home of the Thakalis, a trading community which for long periods exercised unchallenged control over the salt-trade following the Kali Gandaki route. Unlike other trans-Himalayan traders the Thakalis are not Bhotias, and though at one time drawn into the Tibetan cultural orbit, they are likely to have been part of an ethnic group which included also such tribes as Tamangs, Gurungs and Magars.

In their own language the Thakalis call themselves 'Tamang' but it would seem that they have no recent connection with the Tamang tribe of Central and Eastern Nepal. Whatever their original affinities may have been, long exposure to Tibetan cultural influence and the resultant establishment of Buddhist institutions in Thak Khola brought about an assimilation to Bhotia patterns of living and this has only recently been counteracted by the spread of certain Hindu attitudes and practices. This process of change as well as the general cultural background have formed the substance of my paper 'Caste Concepts and Status Distinctions in Buddhist Communities of Western Nepal'.\*

The Thakali area is divided into two separate regions. To the south lies Thaksatsae (Thak of the seven hundred [houses]), and to the north Panchgaon (the five villages). While the most important village of Thaksatsae has for long been Tukche, in Panchgaon such large villages as Marpha, Thini and Shyang are about equal in

\* C. von Fürer-Haimendorf (Ed.), *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, London 1966, pp. 140-60. As this volume is at present out of print some of the ethnographic data on Thak Khola contained in my contribution will be summarized in the following pages.



status and economic weight. The inhabitants of Thaksatsae, however, consider themselves superior to the people of Panchgaon, even though the difference in the dialects and social customs of the two groups is so slight that to outsiders the two populations appear closely linked by tradition and a common pattern of living.

The people of Panchgaon are not greatly concerned about their neighbours' claim to a higher status. Their villages are self-contained units, practising village-endogamy, and intermarriage with other groups is therefore not an object of social aspirations. The trade they engage in is on a smaller scale than that of the people of Thaksatsae, and has so far not been a means of bringing them in close contact with Hindus of Kathmandu or other urban centres. Unlike their neighbours in Tukche they see no advantage in claiming high-caste status. Not that the people of Panchgaon have remained ignorant of the outside world. Many families move every winter to the lower-lying regions where they engage in petty trade, the keeping of wayside inns and liquor stalls, and the transport of goods on pack animals. But the resultant relations with Hindus are not of the kind in which questions of caste-status are of great relevance.

The distinctions between the people of Panchgaon and Thaksatsac become evident in their economic relations rather than in ordinary social intercourse. As the more substantial traders, the leading men of Tukche have long been in a dominant position and able to pay for the services of people from other villages. Numerous men and women of Panchgaon have at one time or other served in the houses of Tukche families, whereas no person of Thaksatsae ever served in the house of a man of Panchgaon. To do so would lower his status in the eyes of his own community, whereas conversely a person of Marpha or Thini does not lose prestige by accepting employment in Tukche.

To the north of Panchgaon lies a part of Thak Khola which is commonly known as Baragaon (the twelve villages) though in fact the number of villages is considerably larger than twelve. The inhabitants of Baragaon, which borders on Lo (Mustangbhot) to the north, Dolpo to the west, and Nye-shang (Manangbhot) to the east, are of Bhotia stock and predominantly Tibetan culture. The Thakalis and other neighbours refer to these Bhotias as Baragaonlis, a term which will be adopted here for reasons of convenience. The

elevation of Baragaon is around 10,000 feet and the climate is so arid that cultivation is possible only where the land can be irrigated.

Lo, which extends to both sides of the upper course of the Kali Gandaki, constitutes a piece of Nepalese territory jutting into Tibet, and resembles the adjoining Tibetan district in climate and geographical features. Until 1951 it formed a separate principality, ruled by the Raja of Mustang, a tributary of the King of Nepal. Culturally, linguistically and ethnically Lo is almost purely Tibetan and the family of its ruler, locally known as *Lo gyelbu* (King of Lo), has always intermarried with the Tibetan aristocracy.

For purposes of comparisons with the high-altitude dwellers of Eastern Nepal, and particularly the Sherpas of Khumbu, the remote and sparsely inhabited Dolpo region is of particular relevance. Dolpo, which resembles Khumbu most closely in altitude and general character, extends roughly between  $82^{\circ}45'$  and  $83^{\circ}30'$  longitude, and  $28^{\circ}45'$  and  $29^{\circ}30'$  latitude. To the south it is bounded by the great Dhaulagiri range and to the west by the Kanjiroba Himal. The northern and north-eastern boundary of Dolpo is formed by the Tibetan frontier, and to the east several ranges of high mountains separate it from the regions of Lo and Thak Khola. Of all the border areas of Nepal, Dolpo is the least accessible, and while during the summer it can with difficulty be reached via the high passes connecting it with Thak Khola to the east and the Jumla region to the north-west, during the winter the only route remaining open is that through Tichurong and the Bheri valley. Communications with Tibet are less difficult, and this accounts no doubt for the predominantly Tibetan character of the ethnic and cultural pattern of Dolpo. Whereas the Sherpas are a population of Tibetan stock and culture, which developed a way of living significantly influenced by interaction with the tribal and Hindu people of the middle-ranges of Nepal, the people of Dolpo appear as a rather primitive and backward group of Tibetans almost totally untouched by contact with Nepalese populations. This is exemplified by the ability of all Sherpas to converse in Nepali and their familiarity with travel in many parts of Nepal, and the fact that the great majority of Dolpo people are ignorant of any language other than their own Tibetan dialect. Indeed Dolpo is in every respect a backwater, where material standards compare unfavourably not

only with those of Khumbu but also with conditions prevailing in the villages of Lo and the neighbouring parts of Tibet. Yet the very primitiveness of life in Dolpo provides an interesting contrast to the comparatively highly developed material culture of the Sherpas and the Bhotias of the Walongchung area. The people of Dolpo are mainly cultivators and cattle-breeders, and their trading activities, though essential for survival, are too limited to compensate for the sparse resources of their land, most of which lies above the 13,000 feet line.

In so far as the physical environment is concerned Dolpo stands to the adjacent Baragaon, where villages lie at an average height of 10,000 feet, in much the same relation as Khumbu stands to Pharak and Solu. But while Sherpas of all these regions consider themselves as one ethnic group within which there is unhindered inter-marriage, the people of Dolpo, Lo and Thak Khola are separated by social as well as by physical barriers. Though they maintain trade relations they refrain from intermarriage, and instances of individuals moving their residence permanently to places outside their home region are relatively few.

The special position of the people of Dolpo cannot be fully comprehended, however, unless we view them in their economic interaction with the inhabitants of the neighbouring regions comprised within the trading system based on the Kali Gandaki route. The focal point of this system was for long periods of time the entrepôt of Tukche, a Thakali village whose importance diminished with the decline of the Tibetan trade subsequent to the political events of 1959.

### *The historical background*

The area of Thak Khola does not figure prominently in any of the accounts of the ancient and medieval history of Nepal, but local traditions and some references in documents concerning the relations between the kingdoms of Jumla and Mustang suggest that at one time it lay within the sphere of influence of the Jumla rajas. The rôle of Jumla will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7 in connection with the history of the Malla kingdom, which in the thirteenth century extended over large parts of Western Nepal and the Tibetan territories of Purang and Guge,

and reached under the king Prithvimalla the apex of its power. Our knowledge of the Malla dynasty and its domain is largely due to the discoveries of the well-known Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci,\* who travelled extensively in Thak Khola, Dolpo and Jumla.

It seems that after the decline of the Malla kingdom local rajas continued to rule over Jumla and its capital known as Sinja (Semja). But the new rulers of Jumla could not assert their authority over the marginal areas of their kingdoms, and tributary chieftains sprang up in various places.

One of these minor dynasties was based on Galkot, and Thak Khola must have passed under its control. Copper-plates (*tām-rapatra*) relating to villages of the Thak Khola and dated between 1703 and 1785 stem from the period when the power of the kings of Jumla was declining. They bear the names of Malla princes other than those of the Jumla kings ruling at that time and thus suggest that they were issued by members of a dynasty of tributary chieftains, perhaps akin to the rulers of Jumla. The rajas of Galkot are the most likely to have extended political power over Thak Khola immediately before the Gorkha conquest, and it may be of significance that the latest of these copper-plates is dated 1785, i.e. two years before Jumla was incorporated into the kingdom of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of Gorkha rule in Nepal. Far from resulting in an effective administration of the territories traditionally subject to the kings of Jumla, the shifting of the centre of political power to Kathmandu created at first a situation in which the people of Thak Khola enjoyed almost complete autonomy.

Until then Thak Khola had been a border area in the true sense of the word, for the kingdom of Mustang (Lo) adjoining it to the north had been part of Tibet and its incorporation into Nepal dates only from the end of the eighteenth century. The rulers of Kagbeni, a fortified place controlling the Kali Gandaki valley and the route to Muktinath, seem to have dominated the group of villages now known as Baragaon, but there is no historical evidence that the Thakalis, inhabiting the area south of Kagbeni, had ever had chieftains of their own. The Thakalis are inclined to claim as their own a legendary prince known as Hangsha Raja of Thini, a

\*cf. his *Preliminary Report on two Scientific Expeditions in Nepal*, Rome 1956, and *Nepal: The Discovery of the Malla*, New York 1962.

village about four miles south of Kagbeni, and to have received the area from Marpha as far as Ghasa as a dowry. But neither inscriptions nor other documents support this story.

Thus the traditions of the Thakalis, who in the past two centuries played a most prominent rôle throughout Thak Khola, throw very little light on their own and the area's remoter history. Their myths of origin, contained in four books ceremonially recited once every twelve years on the occasion of a festival in honour of the four clan gods, point to a connection with Sinja, the capital of the Malla dynasty and subsequently the kings of Jumla. These myths state explicitly that the ancestors of the four Thakali clans lived at one time at Sinja. From there they are said to have wandered eastwards as far as Dhaulagiri, and unable to cross that range, stayed for a brief time at Mu (Mukot) and various other villages of Dolpo, and then crossed over into the Kali Gandaki valley by a route still used in the traffic between Dolpo and Thak Khola.

References to the habits of the people of Dolpo as well as to customs and place names in the Thak area suggest that these legends of the early wanderings of the Thakalis' ancestors mirror the migration of a group of people who must have moved through Dolpo, where they disliked the diet of the local high-altitude dwellers, and after finding a way round the Dhaulagiri range moved into Thak Khola inhabited at that time already by a different population.\*

We have no way of ascertaining in what manner the Thakalis succeeded in gaining their dominant position throughout Thak Khola, and whether they displaced an earlier population. The gap between the mythical account of the origin of the Thakalis' clan-ancestors and historical data in the narrow sense is bridged only inadequately by the testimony of religious monuments and some references in Tibetan records unfortunately largely undated. Thus

\* I have found no new evidence either to confirm or to refute Professor Tucci's surmise that the many caves in the cliffs above the Thakali villages were the habitations of troglodytes who used the caves in winter and shifted to the plateaux for grazing. His argument that the caves are too numerous to have all been excavated as retreats for hermits – though some of them show clear evidence of such use – is certainly convincing, but whatever their origin may have been neither they nor their earliest inmates figure in the traditions or folk-memory of the present Thakalis. cf. *Preliminary Report on two Scientific Expeditions in Nepal*, p. 10.



Tucci\* quotes the biography of a lama from Eastern Tibet, who visited Mustang and the Thak area, and stayed in several identifiable *gompa* and villages including Marpha and Tukche. There he combated, as it seems with temporary success, the Thakali custom of slaughtering animals for sacrificial purposes, and Tucci concludes from this remark that at the time – unhappily unknown – of this lama's visit the Thakalis practised a religion akin to the black Bon and only slightly influenced by Buddhism.

We gain chronologically firmer ground only when we come to the few early buildings which have withstood the ravages of time and occasional periods of neglect. Thus the foundation of the monastery of Ku-tsap-ter-nga, which stands on a hill-top above Thini, is ascribed to Urgyan dPal-bZang and can be placed in the middle of the eighteenth century. The oldest of the *gompa* of Tukche, nowadays known as the Rani *gompa* (Queen's temple) but originally named 'Religion's Isle of Blessing' (*bkra-shis-chos-gling*) may be even older, but the frescoes admired in 1954 by Professor Tucci and in 1956 by David Snellgrove† have been covered up, for in 1962 the building underwent major structural repairs. Tucci described these frescoes, which are now overlaid by a thick coat of plaster as 'the only example of local art unaffected by Nepalese influences', and considered their date as 'not earlier than the sixteenth century'.‡ The nuns now in charge of the Rani *gompa* mentioned to me a document kept in a government office at Baglung according to which it was built in 1621. Even if this date could be confirmed it would tell us little about the age of the village of Tukche, for the *gompa* may well have formed part of an isolated monastery. The main *gompa* of Kobang known as Mai-ki-lha-khang existed certainly as early as 1774, the date of a copper-plate containing the confirmation of rules for the conduct of monks and nuns by Raja Kirthi Bam Malla.

The Thakali villages, now spread out along the banks of the Kali Gandaki, are believed to be of comparatively recent origin, built at a time when considerations of defence were no longer relevant, and ease of communications determined the location of settlements. According to local tradition the older villages were

\* op. cit., p. 13.

† *Himalayan Pilgrimage*, pp. 178, 179.

‡ op. cit., p. 10.

situated on hill-tops and fortified. The four earliest villages were Nakung (the only one which still exists), Kang-ten (above the present Kobang), Nartan (above the present Khanti) and Dzong (which occupied a plateau above Tukche). Of Nakung, now a cluster of a few houses, it is said that entrance was gained by three successive doorways, which in times of danger could be closed and effectively protected the village.

Among the Thakali villages now in existence, Nakung, Nardzung, Kobang and Khanti are believed to be the oldest, but the two main settlements of the Panchgaon area, Thini and Marpha, are at least as old, if not older. Indeed the Thakalis themselves believe that when their ancestors arrived from Sinja the village of Thini was already ruled over by a raja.

At the time when the main settlement on the land of the present Tukche was Dzong, situated on a ledge high above the level of the river and the modern village, Tukche was a meeting place for traders coming from Tibet, Lo and Baragaon on the one side and people from lower Thak Khola and the regions south of it on the other. The market place, where grain was bartered for salt, was called Tuk-che (*tuk* – grain, *che* – flat place), and the first houses are believed to have belonged to Tibetan traders, whose descendants describe themselves nowadays as Khambachan, and do not normally intermarry with Thakalis.

The modern history of Thak Khola can be said to have begun with the introduction of administrative reforms at the time of the prime-ministership of Jang Bahadur Rana (1846–79). Copies of government orders relating to that time are still in the hands of Thakalis and these documents allow us to reconstruct the order of events remembered only vaguely by the present generation of Thakalis. According to an order (*sanad*) issued by Jang Bahadur in 1862, a deputation of Thakalis had requested a reduction in the land revenue of R12,500 which until then had been paid by the 700 households of Thaksatsae. In support of their plea they argued that 216 families had left Thaksatsae and settled in Kaski, Lamjung and other parts of the middle-ranges. The government did not grant the requested reduction of tax, but offered the Thakalis a choice between the *status quo ante* and the payment of land revenue and other taxes according to the rules then applying

to the Humla region of Jumla district. The Thakalis decided, perhaps not fully realizing the implications, to opt for the latter course, and the government order of 1862 describes in twenty-six paragraphs the manner in which taxes should henceforth be collected. The greatest change brought about by the introduction of the Humla rules was the termination of free trade in salt and grain. A customs post was established at Dana, a village south of Thak Khola; customs duty was charged on most commodities carried past that post in either direction, and – most important of all – a monopoly of the trade in salt was granted to the collector of customs.

In those days customs houses were not manned by regular government servants. The collection of duty was farmed out, and the customs contractors – not unlike the publicans of biblical days – were virtually uncontrolled by government. Customs contracts were usually auctioned for periods of three years, and the highest bidder appointed as contractor was awarded the title *subba*, a designation otherwise reserved for the lowest rank of gazetted government servants. In the case of Thak Khola, an area remote from any of the centres of regular administration, the customs contractor was also invested with the powers of a magistrate. As such he wielded political authority in addition to the enormous economic influence derived from his monopoly of the salt-trade, and for more than half a century the customs contractors were the dominating force in Thak Khola.

The first customs contractor appointed in 1862 was Hem Karma Kadga, a Chetri with the rank of captain. He had no traceable connection with Thak Khola and he cannot have held the contract for more than two 3-year periods. There is documentary evidence that in 1869 the contract was already held by Balbir, an ancestor of the most prominent Thakali family of Tukche. Balbir, whose home was in Kobang, belonged to the Dimdzen clan, now known as Sherchan, and local tradition has it that his original name was Kalu. Being fluent in both Tibetan and Nepali, he had served as interpreter in the 1855–6 war between Nepal and Tibet, and it is said that on that occasion his powerful physique earned him the name ‘Balbir’, which he henceforth adopted. A copy of the 108 volumes of the Kengyur,

the Tibetan canon in the possession of one of his great-grandsons, is believed to have been given to him as a reward by a Nepalese army commander, who presumably had obtained it from a Tibetan monastery but as a Hindu had no use for Buddhist sacred scriptures.\* At that time Balbir was the only Thakali known in Kathmandu, and the reputation gained in the Tibeto-Nepalese War enabled him to obtain the customs contract for Thak Khola.

Though wealthy and influential Balbir was not without competitors, and the name of one of his rivals, Patiram Sahu (the Rich) of Nardzung, is still remembered. The latter acted as guarantor when his son-in-law Ram Prasad Gouchan, mentioned in a *sanad* of 1884, bid successfully for the customs contract. The youngest of Patiram's six sons, Krishna Prasad, also held the contract for some years, but Balbir's son Rabiram continued to compete with Patiram's family, and when in possession of the customs contract moved his residence as well as the customs house to Tukche. We know little of Rabiram except that at the time of his death the annual royalty due to the government under the terms of the customs contract was Rs50,000 and that his widow voluntarily relinquished the contract.

It was then that an outsider, Manlal Gurung of Ghanpokhara, first intervened in the affairs of Thak Khola. On the strength of his reputation as a reliable and successful customs contractor in Bhot Khola, the area of the Marsyandi valley, he obtained the customs contract of Thak Khola for an annual royalty of Rs75,000 and established himself in Tukche. It is said that he retained the contract for twelve years, but no exact dates are available. One of his competitors in trade was Harkaman Sherchan (1860-1903), the son of Kabiram, and the rivalry between Harkaman and his younger brother Ganeshman on the one hand, and Manlal and later his son, Narjang Gurung, on the other led to fierce bidding for the customs contract which was held alternately by members of what was then already the most prominent Thakali family, and the Gurung *subba* from Ghanpokhara. Tension between Narjang Gurung and the local inhabitants of

\* Regrettably, and rather surprisingly, the wealthy descendants of Balbir resident in Tukche were unable to produce any documentary evidence relating to the founder of their family's fortunes.

Tukche seems to have been responsible for the move of the customs house from Tukche to a site near Tserok, some three miles to the north of Tukche, while Narjang Gurung held the contract for the period 1917-19. In 1919 Ganesman Sherchan succeeded in organizing local opposition against the contractor, and finally ousted his competitor by a combination of force and diplomacy.\* From then onwards the customs contract was held first by Ganesham himself, then by his son and one of his brother's sons. By that time the members of the Sherchan *subba* family had attained such wealth and influence that no one in Thak Khola could rival their power.

The original source of the Thakali *subba*'s wealth was no doubt the monopoly on the salt-trade along the Kali Gandaki route. All Tibetan salt brought to Tukche by traders of Lo, Baragaon and Panchgaon was compulsorily purchased by the contractor and his agents, and paid either in cash or in grain. Merchants and consumers from areas south of Tukche came there to purchase their requirements of salt, and they too paid either in cash or in grain. The margin between the purchasing and the selling price of the salt was the contractor's profit, and from the subsequent economic rise of the *subba* family it can be surmised that the profit by far exceeded the royalty paid to the government. The competition for the customs contract had driven up this royalty to Rs 150,000 in the early years of the twentieth century, but economic developments independent of the local situation gradually curtailed the volume of the salt-trade, and though in the decade 1919-28 the royalty payable to the government was reduced first to Rs 110,000 and finally to Rs 90,000 during the final years of the monopoly, the customs contractors' accounts are said to have shown a loss of about Rs 40,000 per year. The reason for this decline of the salt-trade was not a fall in the demand for Tibetan salt – the competition of Indian salt being not yet effective – but a sharp drop in the amount of salt exported by Tibet from the area north of Thak Khola.†

\* An account of the relations between the Gurung and Thakali *subba* as seen from the Gurung point of view is contained in Don Messerschmidt's paper 'Parallel Trade and innovation in Central Nepal', published in C. von Fürer-Haimendorf (Ed.), *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal*, London 1974.

† According to a personal communication of Mr. Don Messerschmidt the temporary decline of the flow of salt into Mustang and Thak Khola was probably

We may doubt whether the Thakali *subba* really suffered in any year a loss of Rs40,000, but the changed outlook for the salt-trade certainly induced the members of the *subba* family to support the rest of the Thakali community in a plea for the abolition of the salt monopoly. This approach to the government was successful, perhaps because it coincided with a phase of liberalization under the prime-minister Chandra Shamsher,\* and in 1928 the salt-trade was freed from the control of the customs contractor. The customs house in Tukche and all restrictions on trade between Lo, Baragaon and Panchgaon, and the lower part of Thak Khola, were abolished. There remained a customs post near the Tibetan border, but the duty levied there amounted only to Rs10,000-12,000 per year. The ordinary Thakalis, on the other hand, were able to profit from small-scale trade in salt, and though unable to rival the economic power of the *subba* family, many of them set up as successful independent merchants.

To replace the administrative and judicial authority of the customs contractor the government sent a magistrate (*hakim*) to Thak Khola and established a court at Kobang. However, the court functioned in Kobang only during the summer months, and in the winter was moved to Dana. This agreement, necessitating the periodic move of records, was found impracticable and after three years the government acceded to the magistrate's request to establish the court permanently in Dana, where it is still located.

The Thakali village headmen, known as the 13 *mukhya*, countered this move by deciding to settle as far as possible all civic disputes locally, and to discourage Thakalis from taking their law cases to the court at Dana. Even as late as 1962 only those whose disputes could not be settled by the 13 *mukhya* were supposed to seek justice in the magistrate's court at Dana. By that time the members of the Sherchan *subba* family had expanded their commercial interests to many parts of Nepal and their success in large-scale trading and contract business had more than compensated them for the loss of the salt monopoly. In Thak Khola they had

\* After a visit to Europe, Chandra Shamsher had introduced various reforms such as the abolition of slavery in 1924.

due to the successful efforts of Gurung customs contractors to divert the Tibetan salt-trade to the Marsyandi route over which they had control.

retained considerable economic power. Members of the family continued moreover to act as headmen of Tukche, Kobang and Ghasa, and exerted some control over most of the villages of Panchgaon and Baragaon. The general political climate in Nepal however, was no longer favourable to the rule of any one family, and the dominance of the *subba* family was gradually eroded. The termination of the salt monopoly had freed the Thakalis from their dependence on the one-time *subba* and the people of Panchgaon and Baragaon had learnt to trade on their own account without relying on the middlemen of Tukche.

By the time the present system of *panchayat* elections was introduced in 1964 the leading members of the *subba* family, well-established as affluent businessmen in Bhairawa and Kathmandu, had lost interest in Thaksatsae and did not compete for local positions which could not further their growing ambitions.

Although in Thak Khola the authority of the leading Thakali families had begun to decline already in 1962, there remained at that time their influence over the Dolpo region. Traditionally the Dolpo people had no direct contact with government and no emissary of the governor (*bara hakim*) of Baglung within whose jurisdiction Dolpo lay, ever visited the highland. Contact between the Bhotias of Dolpo and the government was maintained by the Thakalis of Tukche, and one of them, Shankarman Sherchan, held officially the position of *mukhya* – locally known by the Tibetan term *chikyap* – of the whole of Dolpo. Another prominent Thakali of Tukche acted as his agent for the collection of the land revenue from the whole of Dolpo. This tax was fixed at a very low level. It amounted, for example, in respect of the entire village of Tsharka to no more than R30. Once every two years the *mukhya*'s agent went on circuit to Dolpo collecting the revenue and doing some trading at the same time. In the alternative years men of Dolpo, chosen by lottery, took the revenue to Tukche and paid it to Shankarman Sherchan who, in turn, forwarded it to the government treasury. Occasionally, Dolpo people approached Shankarman for the settlement of disputes and in that event they went to see him in Tukche. In 1966 the revenue of Dolpo villages was still being collected by Thakalis of Tukche, but the recently introduced system of district and village *panchayats* throughout Nepal has now superseded this arrangement. The authority over the

inhabitants of the remote region of Dolpo so long enjoyed by Thakalis clearly reflects the power this relatively small community of traders had built up without having ever had to rely on the strength of arms. This is all the more remarkable as the Bhotias of Dolpo themselves exerted political influence over some of their southern neighbours (see p. 207) and acted for them as arbitrators in the same way as Thakalis arbitrated in the disputes of Dolpo people.

Historical information on the territories of Lo and Dolpo is fuller than that on Thak Khola in so far as the earlier periods are concerned, but even scantier in regard to the nineteenth century. It is largely due to the research of David Snellgrove and in particular to his translations of the autobiographies of four lamas of Dolpo\* that we can visualize the conditions prevailing in Dolpo and Lo during the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The biographies confirm that Lo was part of the Tibetan kingdom of Purang, and that until the fifteenth century Lo was administered by a provincial governor (*sDepa*). It seems that subsequently this position became hereditary, and the biographies written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries refer already to the King of Lo, later known as the Mustang Raja. Throughout the Kali Gandaki valley from Kagbeni in Baragaon as far as Mustang, there were fortified castles which were the seats of local rulers, belonging to Bhotia families of aristocratic status. These chieftains acted as the patrons of Buddhist *gompa* which are still in existence and it is probable that, like the King of Mustang, they intermarried with Tibetan families of equal rank.

During the period covered by the biographies translated by Snellgrove, Dolpo and Lo were in close contact and religious institutions of the former enjoyed the support of the rulers and other aristocratic families of Lo. The lamas of Dolpo frequently travelled to Central Tibet and the route they followed led through the town of Mustang. At that time there was no political boundary between Dolpo, Lo and Tibet, and the two former regions were regarded as outlying provinces of Tibet. To the west of Dolpo lay the kingdom of Jumla whose rulers and dominant population, including the ruling dynasty, professed Hinduism. Yet, Buddhism survived in parts of the kingdom, and prominent lamas of Dolpo

\* D. Snellgrove, *Four Lamas of Dolpo*, Vol. 1, Oxford 1967.



were treated with respect and there were occasions when the Jumla rulers sought the advice of sages residing in Dolpo.

Though separated by the wild, sparsely populated and, for large parts of the year, impassable highland of Dolpo, the kingdoms of Jumla and Lo became frequently involved in political rivalries. At times, no doubt, their relations were amicable, but in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there occurred several armed clashes, and there is a theory that many forts in the southern part of Lo were constructed mainly to provide a defence against the incursions of the forces of the Jumla kings.\* Some of these forts are said to have changed hands several times, but in the end the power of Jumla prevailed and the ruler of Lo was forced to pay tribute to the Jumla raja. However, the hegemony of Jumla terminated with its subjection to the rising power of the kings of Gorkha in 1795. Lo, as the less accessible region, retained a much higher degree of autonomy and until the late 1950s the Mustang Raja continued to receive recognition as a ruler in a feudatory relationship to the King of Nepal.

With both Jumla and Lo incorporated within the domain of the Gorkha dynasty, Dolpo became automatically part of the kingdom of Nepal. Though there is no record or memory of Gorkha armies ever invading Dolpo, the changes in the political status of the adjoining regions brought the Bhotias of Dolpo into the orbit of Gorkha rule, and ties with Tibet were gradually loosened. There was no bar to the movements of traders, and even of the Dolpo people's herds, across the newly established political frontier, but it would seem that the volume of cultural and economic interchanges with the Buddhist populations of Tibet diminished. Along some of the traditional trade-routes, such as for instance the route through the Barbung valley, one finds numerous *chorten*, *mani*-walls and other religious structures which have fallen into disrepair and must have been the work of a population considerably larger than the small village communities now inhabiting the area. Several deserted village sites, still recognizable by the ruins of abandoned houses, support this assumption, and it would seem that the decline of the economic standards of Dolpo, recently accelerated by developments resulting from the Chinese occupation of Tibet, may have been a long and drawn-out process beginning perhaps two

\* Michel Peissel, *Mustang, the forbidden kingdom*, New York 1967, p. 255.

centuries ago with the excision of the kingdom of Lo from the political system of Western Tibet.

J. D. A. Stainton, the well-known botanist and author of *Forests of Nepal* (London 1972), who has travelled through the length and breadth of Nepal, shares my impression that the population of Dolpo may have shrunk. He mentions that near the village of Shimen one walks for miles through abandoned fields, and suggests that, in a land where fuel is so short that dung has to be burned, there cannot be much available for fertilizing. In one village near Shimen the local people told him that many fields had been abandoned because yields had fallen to so low a level that they were no longer worth cultivating.\*

A different process of political and economic recession seems to have occurred in the region known as Baragaon, which occupies a part of the Kali Gandaki valley extending between Panchgaon to the south and Lo to the north. The ruins of fortress-like buildings standing on elevated sites which dominate the trade-route leading from Thaksatsae to Mustang suggest that in the not too distant past local chieftains ruling over groups of villages were capable of holding their own *vis-à-vis* their Thakali neighbours as well as against the rulers of Lo. These fortified places must date from a time when Thak Khola still lay outside the sphere where the Gorkha kings exerted effective political influence and when Thakali merchants had not yet risen to a position of political power. The events which led to the downfall of the chieftains of Baragaon, and brought about the economic domination of their people by the Thakalis of Tukche, are shrouded in obscurity and all we know is that until a few decades ago most Baragaon villages were heavily indebted to Thakalis, and that the latter used their economic power to obtain cheap labour. Numerous people from Baragaon, and particularly young persons and children, worked for Thakalis of Tukche as bond-servants, often to discharge debts incurred by their parents. Their position was not very different from that of slaves and as long as Thakalis held the salt monopoly such Bhotias of Baragaon had very little chance of paying off their debts and regaining their freedom.

Yet, among the Baragaonlis there lingers the tradition that

\* Personal communication. See also *Forests of Nepal*, p. 50, for a description of the vegetation of Dolpo.

originally they were of a status superior to that of the Thakalis of Thaksatsae and Marpha, but that the inhabitants of Thini, the seat of a legendary raja, were equal to the people of the highest ranking villages of Baragaon. The population of Baragaon, though conforming to the same cultural pattern, is not homogeneous, and there are status distinctions between the different villages. There is a group of five villages which rank lowest among the village communities of Baragaon, and it is significant that these five villages speak a language closely akin to Thakali, whereas the higher ranking villages speak dialects closely resembling standard Tibetan. The highest status is enjoyed by those villages which are known to have been founded by Tibetan lamas, irrespective of whether they were Buddhist or Bonpo. The status distinctions affect intermarriage. While the inhabitants of the thirteen higher ranking villages freely intermarry, the five lower ranking villages do not form part of this connubial group, though hypergamous unions occasionally occur as an exception to the general rule. Apart from a ban on intermarriage between the two groups there are also restrictions on other aspects of social contact. While according to general Bhotia custom equals may drink from the same cup, which on certain occasions is passed from mouth to mouth, the people from the higher ranking villages do not share their drinking cups with any of the inhabitants of the 'low' villages. Internally these low ranking villages are homogeneous and unstratified, but the other villages contain a complex population consisting of lineages of higher and lower status.

The highest class in these villages, as well as in Lo, is known as Kutak or Shalonga.\* The number of families of Kutak status is small, and in some villages this class is not represented at all. The most prominent Kutak family is that of the ruling chief of Mustang linked by ties of marriage and affinity with many aristocratic families of Tibet. But while the Mustang raja received recognition from the rulers of the Gurkha kingdom, and enjoyed a high rank in the order of precedence of the Kathmandu court, the Kutak families of Thak Khola have retained neither political power nor outstanding wealth, and their eminent social status receives recognition only in matters of etiquette. The Kutak still tend to marry within their

\* The largely endogamous classes of Baragaon correspond to the Tibetan *gyud-pa*.

own class, but Kutak men can enter hypergamous unions with women of lower rank while Kutak women usually do not marry below their own class. The people of Baragaon equate the term Kutak with the term Thakuri, and when speaking Nepali they often substitute 'Thakuri' for 'Kutak'. The one-time position of the Kutak as local chieftains justifies this equation, but the term 'Thakuri' is here used as indicative of a political rôle, and not as a caste-designation. I have never heard of any Kutak claiming membership of the Hindu caste of Thakuris, and some Kutak are lamas of high status in the Buddhist hierarchy.

Next to the Kutak ranks a class known as Padungu, which forms the majority of the population of Baragaon. It is not homogeneous, however, for there is a distinction between the Padungu lineages of the thirteen 'high' villages, and those of the five 'low' villages. The Padungu of the second category are considered inferior to those of the villages which as total communities are of higher rank. Marriage between these two divisions of Padungu is unusual but not unknown. A man marrying a wife of the lower division retains his status and the ritual disabilities to which his wife is subjected are few and not very onerous.

Lower than all the Padungu stands a class known as Ma-Gara or Ma-Rigsin. Some of its members engage in occupations of low status, such as iron-work, but they are not considered 'untouchable' in the Hindu sense, and members of all three castes may inter-dine, provided those of different status do not drink from the same cup.

Until one or two generations ago the people of Baragaon were content to be regarded as Bhotias and saw no advantage in emphasizing their distinction from the Tibetan populations of Lo or Dolpo. Increasing contacts with other communities of Nepal, however, has instilled into them the idea that it is advantageous to identify themselves with one of the major tribes of Nepal and they have begun to call themselves 'Gurung'. When asked to name their clan they are invariably unable to do so, and most of them are not even aware of the Gurung clan-system. Yet, most younger and middle-aged men of all classes insist that they are Gurungs whereas I have heard old men describe themselves quite frankly as Bhotias and mildly ridicule their juniors' claim to being Gurungs.

In contrast to the inequality between the people of Thaksatsae

and Panchgaon and to the present sense of superiority of the Thakalis *vis-à-vis* the people of Baragaon, the status distinctions between certain villages of Baragaon as well as between such classes as Kutak, Padungu and Ma-Gara\* do not reflect clearly defined economic differences. The people of two villages within the lowest-ranking group, i.e. Tetang and Tangbe, are among the richest and most successful traders, and they claim that no member of these two villages has ever been in the employment of Thakalis. Group status is here not directly derived from recent economic success or present-day political power, but may be regarded as an extension of a wider hierarchic system, the roots of which would seem to lie in Tibet rather than in Thak Khola. Such an interpretation would explain the low position of the villages speaking dialects akin to Thakali, for these village-communities presumably represent an indigenous population which was already settled in the Kali Gandaki valley when populations speaking standard Tibetan moved into the area on the crest of a wave of great Buddhist expansion. It is probable that this wave brought certain families of Kutak status as well as the majority of the Padungu to the Thak area, and some of the former must have established themselves as local chieftains. Later most people of Baragaon became economically dependent on the Thakalis of Tukche, who then monopolized the salt-trade with Tibet.

The Thakalis' economic hold over Baragaon has been weakening ever since the abolishment of the salt-monopoly in 1928. Many of the people of Baragaon now engage in trade on their own account, and this has enabled them to wipe out most of their debts to Thakalis. The lessening of economic dependence has resulted in a reassertion of self-esteem, and most Baragaonlis maintain that they and the Thakalis are of roughly equal status. There is no general bar to interdining, but while people of Baragaon often eat in Thakali houses of Tukche and other villages, Thakalis have occasion less frequently to accept the hospitality of the villagers of Baragaon, and some of the more status conscious may hesitate to partake of ritually relevant food, such as rice, cooked by Baragaonlis. There is no formal intermarriage between the two communities, and the only irregular and usually temporary unions are

\* These classes are roughly equivalent to the *gyer-wa* (aristocracy), *miser* (farmers and traders) a *yawa* (outcastes) of such Tibetan regions as Tingri.

between Thakali men and Baragaonli women living in Thakali villages. This situation seems indicative of the persistence of inequality at least under certain circumstances, and it is indeed a fact that those people of Baragaon who have gone to live in Thakali villages occupy an inferior position within Thakali society. They are simply referred to as 'Baragaonli' and no Thakali cares to know from which village or section of Bhotia society they stem. Baragaonlis settled among Thakalis are acutely aware of their lower status, and do not like to be reminded of their origin. Towards outsiders they try to pose as Thakalis, though no pretence is of any avail in bettering their status *vis-à-vis* the Thakalis themselves. Even wealthy Baragaonlis who emulate Thakalis in dress and style of living have not been able to penetrate the inner circle of Thakali society.

Apart from the populations so far described there are in most villages of Thak Khola members of the untouchable castes of Kami (blacksmith) and Damai (tailors and drummers). These castes, which occur throughout the Hindu regions of Nepal are without exception Nepali speaking and in Thak Khola undoubtedly represent an infiltration from the south. Their untouchability is not the result of local developments, but is clearly due to the fact that they were already tinged with the reputation of untouchability when they first came in contact with the Buddhist populations of Thak Khola, and were accepted by the latter at the valuation of the Hindu society in which they had their roots. They have no institutional relations with either Thakalis or Bhotias but are accepted by both as useful craftsmen and cheap occasional labourers, and allowed to exist on the outer fringe of society without any chance of improving their depressed position.

The social pattern of Thak Khola appears in different lights according to the angles from which it is viewed. Seen through the eyes of the present-day Thakalis of Thaksatsae the populations inhabiting the valley form a stratified structure consisting of caste-like elements the most highly placed of which is the Thakali community. This structure is viewed as an extension of the general Nepalese caste-society, and the Thakalis' ambition is to merge their own community with the Thakuri caste. To achieve this aim they have begun to mould their behaviour on the model of high Hindu castes, and in doing so they have accepted the principle that

status depends on behaviour in certain ritually relevant spheres. Aware of the Hindu practice of evaluating communities by what they eat, they have themselves abandoned the consumption of certain types of food and drink, and look down upon anyone who eats yak. They apply criteria based on Hindu ideas of purity and pollution to their neighbours, but ignore, on the other hand the division of the people of Baragaon into groups of different status. To them all Bhotias appear of equal status, because they behave in similar fashion. According to the Hindu view social status cannot be divorced from ritual status, and as all the people of Baragaon eat polluting food, i.e. beef, they are in Thakali eyes of low status, not even excluding the Kutak whose equation with Thakuris they disregard. This evaluation is supported by the 'Thakalis' economic domination of all the other ethnic groups, but it would be an oversimplification to attribute their sense of superiority solely to economic factors. In the days of customs contracts Thakali contractors employed Brahmans, Chetris and Newars as clerks and other staff in the customs houses, and nowadays Thakali merchants have in their establishments outside Thak Khola numerous employees belonging to the upper Hindu castes. In all these cases the employees are economically inferior to the employers, but ritually superior, and these two contradictory status assessments cancel each other out.

When viewed through the eyes of the Bhotias of Baragaon the ethnic groups of Thak Khola do not appear as the parts of a stratified society, but as tribal groups of basically equal status, among whom temporary economic domination of one by the other does not necessarily involve a corresponding distinction in status.

A curiously inconsistent aspect of these two views of Thak Khola society is the discrepancy between the internal structure and the outward attitude of Thakali and Bhotia society. Thakalis of Thaksatsae represent a basically egalitarian society, organized on segmentary lines and devoid of institutionalized internal status distinctions, but they look at the outside social world as a hierarchic structure stratified on caste-lines. The Bhotias, on the other hand, recognize internal status distinctions, but do not see the outside world in terms of social superiority and inferiority.

### *The settlement pattern*

Having outlined the historical and ethnographic background of Thak Khola we may now return to the comparison of the styles of living of the various ethnic groups occupying the highlands on Nepal's northern border. In such a comparative exercise Dolpo lends itself most naturally to comparisons with Khumbu, for both areas lie close to the upper limit of the oecumene and both are the home of peoples forced by their environment into a way of living involving a measure of transhumance. In considering the settlement pattern of the Sherpas of Khumbu one is tempted to view it as a compulsive and, at the same time, ideal adaptation to conditions in Himalayan regions above the 10,000 feet line. So natural and inevitable appear the seasonal moves from one settlement to the other, so obvious the advantages of owning houses and raising crops at different levels of altitude, that one can hardly imagine how hill-farmers and herdsmen of similar material equipment could arrange their life in any other manner. But a visit to an area such as Dolpo quickly dispels such naïve assumptions. There people of Bhotia stock dwell in localities as high and, in some instances, higher than the main villages of the Khumbu Sherpas, and there too they have to reconcile the demands of agriculture and animal husbandry. But the manner in which these demands are met is different, and the resultant way of life clearly distinguishable from that of the people of Khumbu.

The villages of Dolpo are clusters of houses built of stone and the irreducible minimum of timber required for posts, rafters and door-frames. There is no universal, typical pattern followed in the lay-out of the settlements. Where a wide valley favours a dispersal of homesteads, the houses of a village may be built in three or four groups, separated by fields, but within each group the buildings stand close together, either wall to wall, or with small spaces for courtyards and cattle-enclosures left between the individual dwellings. An example of this type of settlement is provided by Do (S. I. Tarap), a village lying in a wide valley, close to the confluence of two streams. The thirty-four houses of the village are divided into three named groups (Thap-tsu, Longdzen and Tsukto), each of which forms a fairly compact cluster, separated by a distance of a



few hundred yards. Two settlements about half an hour's walk from Do are included within the same administrative unit. These are Doro, consisting of six houses, and the Bon 'monastery' of Ship-chhok with its four houses in addition to the *gompa*. Also on a hill above Do there is a Nyingmapa *gompa* with a house inhabited by the lama in charge of the temple.

A similar pattern is repeated further up the valley where the twenty houses of the Tok-Khyu (S.I. Atali) stand in a line on the right bank of the stream, while two smaller settlements each with a small *gompa* are built on the hill-side sloping down to the left bank.

Communications between all these settlements scattered over two converging wide valleys are easy and the inhabitants, though belonging to several different clans and professing partly Buddhism and partly the Bon religion, form a fairly close-knit community. But formidable barriers separate them from their neighbours to the east and west. Fifteen miles due east of Do lies the village of Tsharka, but the journey involves the crossing of one pass of over 18,000 feet and another of some 17,000 feet.

Similarly, the villages of Pungar, situated like Tsharka on the Barbung river, can be reached from Do only by crossing an equally high pass, and throughout the winter all these passes are snow-bound, and the various valleys of Dolpo cut off one from the other.

Tsharka, which is the easternmost village of Dolpo, and responsible for the name Tsharkabhot, erroneously attributed by the Survey of India to the whole of Dolpo, represents a type of settlement quite different in character from Do. Its forty houses occupy a natural hillock rising between the Barbung river and a minor tributary, and the high stone buildings, some with walls up to 50 feet high, look not so much like the individual dwelling houses of a village as the components of a large fortress. The stone walls surrounding cattle-pens and courtyards resemble ramparts, and the highest parts of the houses, with their many storeys and flat roofs, seem like towers built for defence. Yet, it seems somewhat unlikely that this isolated village, more than three days' fast journey from the nearest Tibetan settlement, should ever have served as a fortified frontier-post.

The houses, which are high and narrow, are built closely together, one providing support to the other, and the village consists thus of massive blocks of crude stone structures, broken by a

maze of narrow lanes, here and there opening into a square, usually filled with men spinning, making shoes or doing other odd jobs. The lanes and paths leading into the village are exceedingly dirty, being indiscriminately used as latrines, and never cleaned, a most marked contrast to Sherpa villages which are among the cleanest of Nepal.

Compact villages of similar type, though mostly consisting of houses superior to those of Tsharka, are found also in Thak Khola and some parts of Lo. Many, though not all, of the villages of Baragaon are of this type, and some give the impression of huge fortresses, with all the houses of the settlement combining to form one large structure. In searching for any particular house, one has to make one's way through a labyrinth of dark, often covered, passages and lanes, and much of the life of such a castle-like village takes place on the flat open roofs from which people get into their houses by way of notched logs sticking out of the square holes cut into the roofs. The size of these villages depends on the land available. While the harsh environment of Dolpo does not favour a concentration of too large a population in one place and villages such as Tsharka with forty houses represent the upper limit, the lower-lying villages of Baragaon are less limited in size. Here we find villages such as Tshuk, Tetang and Tangbe, with well over 100 houses as well as several large villages in the Muktinath valley. Cultivation, though as in Dolpo entirely dependent on irrigation, is there more extensive, and its yield as well as earnings from trade permit greater concentrations of population.

## *Houses*

Dolpo houses are built of unfashioned stone, and the walls are left bare and unpainted both inside and outside. The rooms are narrow, low and dark; tiny window openings, or in some cases only a hole in the roof, let in the light as well as the rain and wind. The only door may be not much more than 3 feet high, and through this one steps into a pitch-dark entrance often lying 1 or 2 feet below ground-level. Here goats, sheep and an occasional calf are kept, and a rickety notched log-ladder leads up to one or more small rooms. In most of the houses there is a room, sometimes no longer than 8 × 8 feet, which serves the family as both kitchen and bedroom.

A low door usually leads from there into one more, often completely dark, room where provisions are stored. In bigger houses the main room containing the hearth is somewhat more spacious and there may be two or three additional small rooms, either on the same floor or on a floor above.

The poverty of the Dolpo Bhotias' material possessions presents a remarkable contrast to the rich assembly of valuable household goods contained in many Sherpa houses. In Dolpo it is not unusual to find nothing in a house except a few chipped wooden vessels, a miniature table – not unlike a low wooden stool – to be placed before respectable visitors, a few torn rugs and a number of grimy cooking implements. Yet the owner of such a dwelling may not be badly dressed and may possess a hundred or more sheep and goats representing a value of many thousand rupees. In view of the small size and bad lighting of the rooms it is not surprising that most household tasks are performed on the flat, open roofs or in the streets and courtyards. There women dry and pound grain, tease and spin wool, weave cloth and blankets, and sew clothes, whereas the men occupy themselves with spinning, shoe-making, and the preparation and repair of saddles and harnesses and saddle-bags. It is only in the winter that people must spend much of their time inside the houses, and the discomfort they suffer at that time contrasts vividly with the comparative luxury enjoyed by the average Sherpa family. Most of the subsidiary Sherpa houses in *yersa*- and *guns*a-settlements are far more commodious and comfortable than the one and only house of many a Bhotia family in Dolpo.

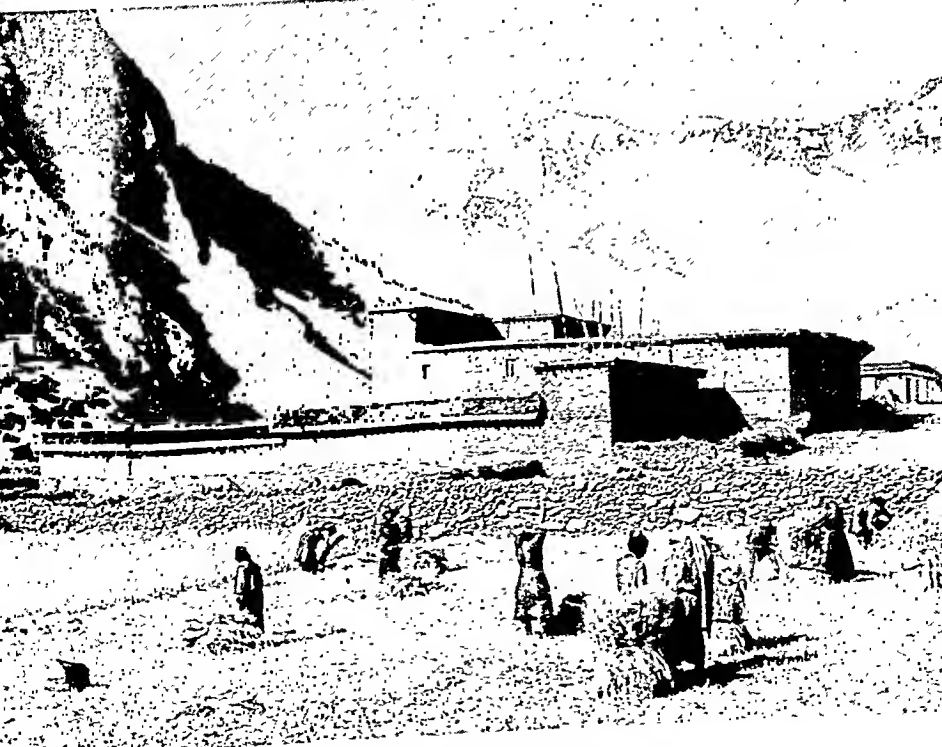
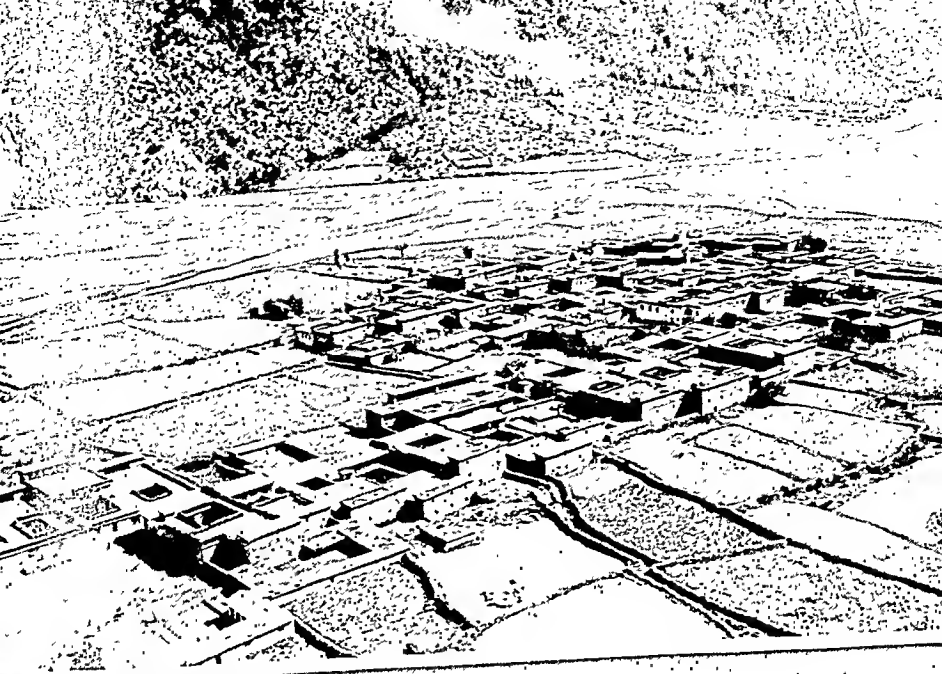
One of the reasons for the wretchedness of Dolpo dwellings is undoubtedly the scarcity of timber. Every post and rafter for a Dolpo house has to be brought over difficult paths from great distances, and it is understandable that houses are built in a style requiring as little timber as possible. It would be impossible, for instance, to find the planks for the wooden floors, which contribute so greatly to the neatness and comfort of Sherpa houses.

It cannot be denied, moreover, that the people of Dolpo, like most of the poorer Tibetans, lack a sense of cleanliness and tidiness, and that they do not mind living under conditions which the humblest of Sherpas would consider intolerable. Peter Aufschneider, who has travelled widely in many of the remote areas of Tibet, tells me, however, that the low standards of Dolpo are

unusual even for the poorest parts of rural Tibet. One of the few exceptions to the primitiveness of dwellings in Dolpo is the house of the lama in charge of the Bonpo *gompa* of Ship-chhok near Do. Its *lha-khang*, which serves as a chapel as well as the lama's study, is a fair-sized room containing painted chests, leather coffers, some good painted scrolls (*thanka*) and a large number of books. Compared with the houses of even the wealthiest of villagers this study is luxurious indeed, and it shows that under the stimulus of a definite desire for better accommodation, Dolpo people are capable of constructing dwellings providing the inhabitants with reasonable comfort. This is borne out also by the much more spacious houses of Saldang in Western Dolpo. In Saldang each homestead consists of several buildings arranged round a walled-in courtyard. The main house is double-storeyed with room for the cattle on the ground floor and the living quarters on the upper floor. The houses of wealthy people have wooden floors made of broad planks as in Khumbu and wooden shelves are arranged along the walls. The very thick main walls of these houses are made of compressed earth which is confined between planks until dry. Separate single-storeyed buildings line the courtyard, and these are used mainly as store-rooms. This type of relatively luxurious homestead with its ample space for stores suggests that in times past Saldang was perhaps a centre of entrepôt trade on the model of Tukche though on a very minor scale. A subsequent decline of trade and shrinking of the population may account for the existence of ruined houses and abandoned fields in many parts of Dolpo, a phenomenon not easily explained simply by the assumption of migrations within the area.\*

In Baragaon and Lo the houses are both larger and better built than in most parts of Dolpo. Where the terrain allows a reasonable spread of the settlements, most houses stand by themselves separated from others by lanes and large, open courtyards surrounded by stone walls. But there are also villages where level space is limited, and there the houses are built wall to wall, in some cases forming fortress-like clusters, which from a distance look like one enormous building. The individual houses of such compact

\* For the information regarding Saldang, which I have not visited, I am indebted to Christian Kleinert, who has made a study of architectural patterns in Nepal.



The Thakali village of Tukche  
Barley harvest at Tukche



The leading Thakali headmen in 1962  
Bhotia men of Baragaon dancing at the Muktinath fair

villages (e.g. Tetang) are up to five- and even six-storeys high, but are as narrow, dark and untidy as the houses in most other Bhotia settlements. Even in the villages where space is less confined and the houses spread out over a larger site, most of them have the living quarters on the first floor, and in the houses of wealthy people there are also rooms on the second and sometimes even the third floor. Yet, though buildings may be large and contain numerous rooms, the individual rooms are as a rule small and there are few houses with big halls comparable to the main rooms of the larger Sherpa houses.

Many houses, however, are built round an interior courtyard, surrounded on all sides by open veranda-like spaces, where much of the housework is done. A single door, often big enough to admit ponies and other pack-animals leads into such a courtyard, and access to the verandas on the first floor and the rooms lying behind them is gained by the usual notched logs. Another notched log ladder leads up to the flat roof, or sometimes to a second floor. Though some of these houses are large and fairly elaborate, they are usually grimy and untidy.

Exceptions are the great castle-like houses of the Mustang Raja, and the living quarters of the senior lamas in some monasteries. Some of the 'palaces' which the raja owns in many of the villages of his domain were once proud buildings, with fine halls containing valuable frescoes, but most of them are now in disrepair. A similar fate befell even earlier the huge towering houses of various chieftains of Baragaon. Their ruins still stand in villages such as Kagbeni, Dzarkot and Dzong, but the wealth and position of their owners have long disappeared, and deprived of maintenance the buildings are in a state of partial collapse.

While the houses of Dolpo have bare stone walls, the people of Baragaon plaster both the exterior and interior walls of their houses, and sometimes embellish them by giving door and frames a wash of reddish earth. While the base of a house is invariably built of stone, the rest can also be built of unburnt mud-bricks, which are sun-dried. Some of the older houses had mud walls, which were constructed between planks, and this method of building is also used in Lo, where the climate is even more arid than in Baragaon. In the villages of Lo much greater care is taken over the appearance of the houses. The walls are invariably plastered and

regularly white-washed, and doors and windows are framed in broad bands of colour, sometimes a dark blue and sometimes a rusty red. Against the white background of the walls, these bands of colour give the houses an attractive look, and this is often enhanced by the woodwork of the windows being painted in several vivid colours.

The absence of all but essential embellishments on dwellings in Dolpo can be accounted for by the low economic status of the inmates, but the superior standard of houses in Lo as compared to Baragaon is not as easily explained. The people of Lo are inherently no better-off than those of Baragaon, and the greater emphasis placed on the decoration of houses must therefore have other than purely economic causes. The inspiration for their aesthetic efforts most probably comes from Tibet, where houses are normally well-maintained, and the example of the ruling family may have reinforced the stimulation derived from frequent contacts across the Tibetan border.

Even more substantial than the villages of Baragaon are the settlements of Panchgaon and Thaksatsae. In these Thakali settlements many houses are built round a courtyard, an architectural style conditioned by the strong wind regularly sweeping through Thak Khola from noon until sunset. The courtyard, entered through a solid gate, is surrounded by store-rooms large enough to accommodate substantial quantities of trade goods, and there may also be a stable for horses and mules. A flight of stone steps leads to the first floor, where covered verandas overlook the courtyard on three sides. The broad verandas, from which one enters the living-rooms of the house, are convenient places for social or ceremonial gatherings, or the performance of household chores. A notched log ladder leads from the veranda onto the large flat roof, which is used for a great variety of purposes, ranging from ritual performances to the threshing of barley and the drying of all kinds of grain and pulse. At the rear of such a flat roof there is invariably a covered gallery with solid walls at the back and both sides, and wooden pillars in front.

The most striking feature of Thakali houses, however, is the immaculately maintained interior, and particularly the kitchens furnished with arrays of polished brass pots and pans, and a smooth mud floor. The contrast to the usually very untidy houses of the



Bhotias of Baragaon, not to speak of those of Dolpo, is remarkable and the interior of even modest Thakali houses compares most favourably with that of the houses of any other rural population of Nepal. Those of the wealthy merchants of Tukche are richly fitted out with carpets, wooden bedsteads and even such items as tables and chairs of Western design.

### *Temporary settlements*

The people of Dolpo, though often moving with their herds to pastures at a considerable distance from their villages, do not build alternative settlements of a permanent nature, nor is it customary to cultivate land in more than one locality. The men and women who move with their herds to distant pastures, live there in camps (*desa*) consisting of a number of tents made of yak hair. These tents are transported on the backs of yak from camp-site to camp-site but once put up they may remain for some weeks in the same place. At the camp-sites, regularly used by a certain number of families from a particular village, there are well-built stone enclosures for calves and lambs, and the tents are usually arranged in a semi-circle, not more than 20 or 30 feet one from the other.

Life in these spacious tents, which are furnished with rugs and cushions, is not much less comfortable than in the narrow, dark and smoky houses of the villages, and many cattle-owners spend a large part of the year in such camps. The difference between a *desa* of Dolpo, and a Sherpa *yorsa* does not lie only in the type of dwellings, but also in the kind of activities carried on by the inhabitants. The herdsmen and women in a Dolpo *desa* have no other major occupation than the care of their yak, sheep and goats, though some women take their looms with them and men often spin. As there are no potato plots there is no agricultural work of any kind in such settlements. A *desa* thus is nothing but a camp-site where at certain times the same families pitch their tents, but it is not a subsidiary settlement in any way comparable to a Sherpa *gunsa* or *yorsa*, where people have a permanent home additional to that in their main village.

One could argue that the scarcity of timber, much more acute in Dolpo than in the comparatively well-wooded Khumbu, is a bar to the construction of subsidiary settlements, inhabited only for a

week at a time, but this argument does not hold good in relation to some of the *desa* lying a few hours' walk from parts of the Barbung Khola, where wood of some sort is available, and we have to remember that Sherpas too have to bring the timber required for the construction of *yersa*-houses from a distance of one or two days' journey.

Moreover, solid and permanent houses for herdsmen are unknown not only in Dolpo, but also in Thak Khola. Those Bhotias of Baragaon who breed yak keep their herds most of the year on grazing grounds high above the villages, but the herdsmen who look after these animals live in tents and do not construct permanent dwellings in any way comparable to the solid houses of the Sherpa *yersa*- and *gunsa*-settlements.

Alternative settlements of one and the same community exist, however, on some of the approaches to the central highland of Dolpo. In the area known as Phoksumdo the people of Ringmo own houses of about equal size in a lower and a higher settlement, and at both these localities, there are cultivated fields; potatoes are grown at the lower, and barley at the higher village. The situation is similar in the valley of the Keha Lungpa on the route from Thak Khola to Dolpo. The only inhabitants of this gorge-like valley live alternately in two settlements. On a ledge, perhaps 600 feet above the right bank, lies their summer settlement known as Biling, a compact cluster of some twenty-five houses, built virtually in one block, with some houses accessible only through the courtyards and passages of others. Such level ground as can be irrigated has been turned into terraced fields, and here the people of Biling grow buckwheat during the summer, sowing in June and harvesting in October. Further upstream and across the gorge lies their alternative settlement, known as Gok, but often referred to simply as *gunsa*. There the houses stand further apart, and there the people spend most of the winter. The wheat grown on terraced, irrigated fields is sown in the autumn and harvested in August or September. Apart from these two settlements, there is a deserted village, known as Sangdak (S.I. Sangdak), which lies on the same side as Gok on a hill-slope directly opposite Biling. It had to be abandoned because a landslide destroyed the only channel by which water could be brought to the houses and the nearby fields. Outsiders still refer to the whole village-community now occupying Biling and

Gok as Sangdak. Though the people own yak, the possession of two settlements is not connected with their herding activities, but probably due to the extreme scarcity of cultivable land, which induced villagers to utilize the only two places in the valley where the slopes could be terraced and irrigated. And as these lie too far apart to be farmed from one village, the construction of houses in two places was the natural consequence of the extension of cultivation to two widely separated localities.

The example of this community shows that the device of alternative settlements with permanent houses though not entirely foreign to the Bhotias of this region, is resorted to only when the needs of cultivation so demand, not in order to facilitate the task of herdsmen. And this suggests that perhaps the subsidiary settlements of the Sherpas owe their permanence and solidity more to the dispersal of cultivation than to the desire of herdsmen for shelters more comfortable than a tent. For it is the cultivation of potatoes in privately owned plots as well as the cultivation of grass on walled-in manured meadows and the subsequent storage of the hay in solid, snow-resisting houses, which lends the *yorsa*-settlements their great importance in the pattern of Sherpa economy. Without the need to tend potato plots and meadows, and to store their produce the Sherpas would be no more in need of subsidiary permanent houses than the Bhotias of Dolpo or Lo. Sherpa herdsmen, who often camp in *resa* offering rather less comfort than the Bhotias' tents, are as capable of living under conditions of considerable hardship as the highlanders of Dolpo. However, they evinced more enterprise in transforming and utilizing their environment, and thus developed a settlement pattern more advanced and elaborate than that of Bhotias living at comparable altitudes in Dolpo. In Chapter 8 we shall see that some of the Bhotias of Humla have alternative settlements at different elevations in circumstances similar to those of Khumbu.

## Agriculture

The economy of the regions of Thak Khola, Lo and Dolpo is based on agriculture, animal husbandry and trade, but the emphasis varies from region to region, and sometimes even from village to village. Climatic and environmental features limit the

options open to the inhabitants. Agricultural methods have to be adapted to a climate much more arid than that of such areas as Khumbu. Upper Thak Khola and Lo are almost completely sheltered from the monsoon, the Annapurna Himal and the Dhaulagiri range forming an effective barrier against the rain clouds drifting northwards from the Gangetic plains. In the Thakali village of Tukche one can see the build-up of clouds pushing northwards through the Kali Gandaki valley on most days during the monsoon months, but they usually discharge over lower Thaksatsae and only some minor showers fall at Tukche. Panchgaon has even less precipitation and the regions of Baragaon and Lo form part of an almost completely arid zone where rain falls only on the upper slopes of high mountain ranges.

So arid is the habitat of nearly all the western Bhotias and most Thakalis that cultivation is possible only on irrigated land. In this respect their agriculture resembles that of Tibet much more closely than that of the Sherpas and the Bhotias of Eastern Nepal. The need for irrigation greatly limits the areas which can be cultivated, whereas Sherpas can expand their agricultural activities to any site which is naturally level or lends itself to terracing. The constant attention called for by irrigation is also an effective bar to a simultaneous cultivation of widely dispersed holdings by the same family, like the Sherpas' potato plots in distant *yersa*- and *gunsa*-settlements.

Fields and even whole settlements have to be abandoned in localities where the water supply has dried up. Irrigation channels leading along a steep slope may be carried away by a landslide, and their reconstruction may be beyond the technical abilities of the villagers. Thus there lies close to the present Gemi (S.I. Kehami) in Lo a whole 'ghost village' with its extensive, carefully terraced land, which had to be deserted because erosion on a hill-slope created a ravine just where the sole irrigation channel led along a hill-slope. The inhabitants were unable to bridge this ravine and restore their water supply,\* so they moved further up the valley and founded the present village of Gemi. In other places shrinkage of subterranean glaciers has led to the drying up of springs.

Another concomitant of irrigation is an enhanced interdepend-

\* This is one of the many places where a few lengths of plastic pipes could restore large areas to cultivation.

ence of the members of a village-community. Where all fields depend on the water supply from one or two sources, it must be the responsibility of all villagers to care for the maintenance of irrigation channels and agree on the distribution of the water.

In Tsharka the fields of the senior lama are irrigated first, and the subsequent order of irrigation is determined by dice. In Mo, on the other hand, the decision in which order the fields are to be irrigated rests with the village headman, and normally each field is irrigated three times during the period of growth of the barley. In Phijer the barley fields are irrigated five times, and in Khublia barley is irrigated eight to nine times but buckwheat requires more water and may have to be irrigated as much as sixteen times. Throughout Dolpo the village-headman has the task of organizing repairs to the irrigation channels.

While any Sherpa may construct new fields by terracing a previously uncultivated hill-slope without interfering with his fellow villagers' interests, the member of a village-community in Dolpo or Lo cannot construct new fields without affecting by their irrigation, the supplies reaching other already existing fields. In Tsharka I was told that no new fields were being constructed because all the irrigable land was already under cultivation, but that in the event of an extension of irrigation being found possible, *all* the villagers would have to agree to the construction of any new field. In Tetang and many other villages of Baragaon the construction of irrigation channels is organized by elected village officials, the *rolwa*, whose office corresponds to that of the Sherpa *naua*, and who have the power to fine anyone absenting himself from this communal task. There are various devices to ensure a just distribution of the water.

In Lubra, one of the smaller villages of Baragaon, for instance, the order in which the fields of the villagers are to be irrigated is determined by the drawing of lots. Before the sowing of wheat in October or November, every household provides a stick with distinctive marks. A young boy puts all the sticks under his cloak, shuffles them with closed eyes and then hands them to a second boy, who also with closed eyes arranges the sticks in a line. The position of the various sticks determines the order of priority of the householders' claims to the water of the irrigation channel. This order of priorities, established once a year, applies to both winter

and summer crops. Quarrels arising over water rights are said to be rare.

The maintenance and construction of irrigation channels is the joint responsibility of all householders of a village-community and there can be little doubt that the interdependence of all those using an irrigation system militates against the sale of land to persons not resident in the village. Whereas in Sherpa villages land often changes hands, and we have seen that people resident in Namche Bazar have appreciable land-holdings in other villages, similar arrangements are rare in Dolpo. In Mukot village I was told that there was no custom of land sales and that in the whole area of the Barbung Khola no one ever sold land or houses. In Baragaon too land seldom changes hands and some of the villages such as Tetang, Tangbe and Lubra are so self-contained that none of the inhabitants owns any property outside his own village and no outsider has any claim to a part of the village-land.

In Lubra, for instance, all land belongs nominally to the temple, which is a Bonpo *gompa*, and there are nine allotments of land, each of which carries obligations towards the upkeep of the temple and its services. The holders of these allotments, who are known as *dongba*, were originally not allowed to sell their shares of the village-land, but in recent years *dongba* allotments have been sold to co-villagers either in their entirety or as half-shares. A further subdivision of the allotments is not allowed, however. Villagers are permitted, on the other hand, to construct new fields which are then not included in the traditional *dongba* holdings, and whoever does so has to pay a tax to the village according to the amount of the seed grain sown on the new land.

The system of self-contained villages broke down, however, wherever in Baragaon Thakali merchants from Tukche developed an economic stranglehold over the less sophisticated Bhotia villagers and gained possession of the land of those most indebted to them. As landowners they had to take an interest in the maintenance and development of the irrigation system, and some Thakalis spent large sums on the construction of new channels. A conspicuous example is a splendid channel constructed by Shankerman Sherchan of Tukche in the area of Muktinath. Such public works benefiting the agriculture of whole villages are a source of social prestige as well as of religious merit.

There are great differences in land use between Dolpo, where most of the cultivated land lies at altitudes between 13,000 and 14,000 feet and the considerably lower-lying villages of Baragaon and Lo. In Dolpo only one crop a year can be grown, and this is mainly *ua*-barley or wheat, though in some villages potatoes, buckwheat, oil-seed and a kind of radish are also cultivated in moderate quantities. The choice of crops depends on the locality and presumably on the type of soil. In Phijer village, for instance, only wheat and buckwheat are grown, but no barley, whereas the people of Pungar grow mainly *ua*-barley as well as a few potatoes and *pindalu*, a tuber used as a vegetable. In the area of Kakot, which lies in the lower Barbung valley, wheat, sweet buckwheat, potatoes,\* oil-seed (*thori*) and radishes are cultivated.

The sequence of agricultural activities in Dolpo varies to some extent from region to region. In the fairly typical village of Tsharka cultivation begins in April with spreading of manure, which both men and women, but mainly the latter, carry from the cattle sheds and pens to the fields. The fields are then ploughed and this work extends well into May. There follows the repair of irrigation channels and the sowing of *ua*-barley. From June onwards fields are irrigated and when the plants are well-established they are weeded with iron rakes. In July–August the barley fields are weeded a second time, and this is done by picking out the weeds by hand. The harvest of the barley takes place in September–October. The sheaves are stacked on or near the fields. The threshing is done in October–November, when the ears are completely dry. There is no agricultural work from the middle of November until April.

In Baragaon and many parts of Lo, on the other hand, there are winter as well as summer crops and in October or early November wheat and barley are sown to be harvested in June, soon after which the land is ploughed up again and prepared for the sowing of buckwheat.

A major distinction between the western Bhotias' and the Sherpas' methods of cultivation is the universal use of animal-drawn ploughs. While until the 1950s the Sherpas used to cultivate

\* David Snellgrove's statement (*Himalayan Pilgrimage*, p. 84) that potatoes are not grown in Dolpo applies only to its western part and not to the Barbung valley.

largely with hoes and ploughs drawn by men, the western Bhotias employ without exception animals to draw their wooden ploughs. In Baragaon and Lo they plough with a pair of cross-breeds, but in Dolpo a single yak is harnessed to an extremely primitive wooden plough by means of a curved yoke attached to the plough with ropes. A woman walks behind the plough dropping wheat, barley or buckwheat seed into the newly made furrows.

When the ploughing of a field has been completed, the surface is smoothed by breaking up the larger clods, and the field is then divided into long strips and each of them surrounded by a low dam. Water from an irrigation channel is then led into one of these divisions after the other and for a short time the field is covered by a sheet of water broken only by the low dams.

Ploughing is considered men's work, but women sow, help smooth the fields and distribute the water by opening and closing channels and ducts. Most of the weeding is also done by women. There are no organized labour gangs, comparable to the *ngalok* of a Sherpa village, but neighbours help each other and women prefer to do the weeding in small groups rather than alone.

All types of grain crops are harvested with sickles, the stalks being cut fairly close to the ground, and this method differs from that of the Thakalis who cut off the ears only or tip them off with bamboo staves used in a scissor-like manner. The sheaves are then carried to walled-in threshing floors, which lie either in between the houses or, in the case of compact, tightly clustered settlements, on the outskirts of the village. The ears are cut off for threshing and the straw stacked. The threshing is done by teams of men and women, who wield long flails, and usually work in two lines facing each other. The flails consist of a long bamboo stick to which a beater made of four short pieces of bamboo is tied with leather thongs in such a way that it rotates as the thresher lifts the flail and then hits the earth with its broad side. Winnowing is done with bamboo fans.

In many localities harvesting is a communal affair. Cooperation extends in some cases to neighbouring villages. The four Baragaon villages of Tshuksang, Gagar, Tsele and Tetang, for instance, have an arrangement to help each other with the harvest of buckwheat. The cutting of the buckwheat in each village is finished in one day, for the people of all four villages work together. Thus about 300



men and women from the three other villages of the group come to work on the buckwheat harvest of Tetang. The visitors help their special, personal friends but if any cultivator lags behind with the work on his fields, all the other villagers come to his help. Usually the work of cutting is completed by the late afternoon and then the young people sing and dance, while the older ones drink beer, provided by the host village. One or two days later the same procedure is repeated in another of the four villages. After a week or so, the four villages combine once more for the threshing of the buckwheat.

This cooperation does not extend to the harvest of *ua*-barley. For this, people of Lo come to Baragaon and work for wages paid usually in grain. Similarly, the people of Tshuksang, Gagar, Tsele and Tetang go and help with the harvest of *ua*-barley in the villages of the Muktinath valley and the inhabitants of these villages in turn work for wages in the barley and wheat harvest of the Thakali villages of Thaksatsae.

Owing to the difference in altitude the crops ripen in the various areas at different times and this facilitates a concentration of labour in one area at a time. The seasonal movements of labour make for an efficient utilization of the existing manpower, which could not be achieved if everyone worked on his own village-land.

We have seen that the Sherpas make the best possible use of the short agricultural season and their own resources of labour by switching these repeatedly from one of their holdings to another, each family owning property at various altitudes. In Baragaon and Lo a similar result is achieved by periodic movements of bands of agricultural workers from one village to another. The distinction between the two systems lies only in the fact that Sherpas own holdings at different levels and move backwards and forwards between them, whereas the Bhotias of Baragaon own land only in one locality but go to work in other places, where they receive a share of the harvest as a wage for their labour. As the same man may today employ people from another village, and tomorrow earn himself wages of grain by working on the harvest of a third village, the Bhotias do not consider such work for daily wages as detrimental to their social prestige. Mobility of labour is a device by which peak periods of agricultural work can be coped with in a sparsely populated area, where there is normally no pool of landless agricultural labourers.

Conditions in Dolpo are different, for here the cultivated area is comparatively small and the people of a village do not need any outside help with their harvest. Also the great mountain barriers separating the various groups of villages one from the other impede communications, and would make it uneconomical for large groups of people to trek to a neighbouring village in order to give a hand in the harvest. Local helpers employed by relatively wealthy men are paid a daily wage in cash or in grain. In Mukot such daily labourers received in 1962 either R2 or 3 *pathi* (about 12 lbs) of barley for harvesting, but only 1 *pathi* of grain for assistance with sowing or ploughing.

The storage of the grain produces few problems. As the climate of the entire area is arid, few precautions have to be taken to protect it against damp. Immediately after the threshing it is spread on mats and dried in the sun, usually on the flat roof of the owner's house, but occasionally also on a threshing floor. Once it is dried the grain is stored in sacks, either on the ground floor or on the first floor of the dwelling houses. There are no separate store-houses and no grain bins.

Unlike the Sherpas, the western Bhotias grow potatoes only in small quantities and in most of the villages of Lo they are an expensive luxury. The excessively dry climate of Lo is obviously not suitable for potatoes, but in Dolpo, where there is moderate rainfall during the monsoon, potatoes should thrive better. It may well be that there they represent a recent introduction and in time may gain in importance.\*

In the section on trade we shall see that grain, though produced mainly for home consumption, is also used for barter. The cultivators of Baragaon, for instance, take part of the *ua*-barley they grow to Lo, and there barter it for salt, some of which they keep for their own use, and the rest they exchange for rice in Ghasa or Dana, villages in the southern part of Thak Khola. The people of Dolpo, on the other hand, do not grow sufficient grain for their own consumption and depend on bartering salt, wool, blankets and goats for the buckwheat, maize and rice obtainable in the Tichurong region.

\* To John Hitchcock I owe the information that in Dhorpatan, south of the Dhaulagiri range, the first potatoes were introduced only in the early 1960s.

## Animal husbandry

The breeding of livestock forms part of the farming economy of all western Bhotias but in Dolpo, where extremes of altitude and climate limit the cultivation of crops, pastoral activities are as important as they are in Khumbu and the Limi region of Humla. Yak are indispensable as a source of dairy produce and meat, and as pack animals in seasonal moves. Large numbers of sheep and goats are also bred and their milk provides the people of Dolpo with a vital part of their diet.

In normal times there were large herds of yak, but when I visited Dolpo in 1962 the cattle population had been decimated by the invasion of Tibetan refugees who had crossed the nearby border with enormous herds of yak and sheep. The arrival of so many animals led to the rapid exhaustion of pastures with the result that not only most of the refugee cattle but also a large part of the local livestock died of starvation. Such figures as I obtained were therefore not typical of the usual cattle economy of Dolpo, and any comparison with the situation observed in Khumbu would be misleading. The magnitude of the disaster which befell some villages can be judged by the accounts of individual herders who had lost nearly all their stock. Thus a man of Tsharka told me that before the arrival of the Tibetans refugees he had owned 60 yak, and that of these only 8 yak were left. The Japanese anthropologist, Ryuzo Takayama, who visited Tsarka in 1958 before the invasion of Tibetan refugees, describes the pastoral economy of the area as it must have been in more normal times, and the following account is based partly on his description.\*

Most people of Dolpo share the widespread Tibetan prejudice against producing hybrids between yak and common cattle. R. B. Ekvall, writing about Tibetan pastoralism, mentions the belief 'that hybridisation is not quite the proper thing, either because the local gods may become angry and send cattle epidemics, storms, and killing hail or because it is poor long-term management'.†

In Tsharka I was told that no hybrids (*dzo*) were bred, the

\* 'Economy of the Agro-Pastoral Tibetans in the Torbo Region, N.W. Nepal,' *Japanese Journal of Ethnology*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Sept. 1960. (The article is in Japanese.)

† R. B. Ekvall, *Fields on the Hoof, Nexus of Tibetan Nomadic Pastoralism*, New York 1968, p. 15.

explanation being that a long time ago a man tried to do so but that the attempt was given up because the cross-breeds did not survive, people fell victim to disease and there were other bad omens. The prejudice does not extend to the keeping, in contrast to the breeding, of *dzo*, however, and according to Takayama's observations there were cross-breeds in the villages of Tengpur, Shimen, Reman, Kubha, Thebà, Poe and Shey Gumpa. In four of these villages there were also small numbers of bulls (*lang*) and as these could have no other purpose than the breeding of hybrids it is likely that some of the Dolpo people disregard the taboo on the production of hybrids. Others buy them from regions outside Dolpo and we shall see (p. 195) that at times cross-breeds were brought from areas as distant as Solu in Eastern Nepal.

Most male yak are castrated. In Tsharka there were in 1958 only 9 stud yak bulls among a total of some 200 male and female yak. Men who owned no stud yak could hire a yak bull for mating with their female yak by paying R1 to the owner. In the village of Poe this service was given free to poor men, and in Phijor the owner was paid in butter at a rate of 4 lbs a time.

Yak-herding involves periodic moves from pasture to pasture as well as the making and storing of hay. Within a radius of about ten miles from Tsharka there are several pastures, each of which is known by a separate locality name. These pastures are evaluated according to a scale ranging from 'good' to 'bad'. The pastures are owned in common and their use is strictly regulated. Before the herdsmen take their animals to the pastures lying at altitudes greater than that of Tsharka, the routes from pasture to pasture which the various herds are to take are determined by the throwing of dice, and the combinations of good and bad pastures on a route are arranged so as to ensure a fair deal for all the cattle-owners. There is a distinction between villagers who own a tent and those who do not. The former move with their yak, sheep and goats from pasture to pasture, whereas the latter graze their sheep and goats in the hills near the village and entrust the few yak they own to herdsmen possessing tents.

In 1958, 24 households of Tsharka owned tents and the average number of members of those households was 6.2, and the average number of yak owned by them was 16.7. Ten households

had no tents and the average number of their members was 3.1 while the average of yak owned by these households was 4.4.

The annual herding cycle recorded by Takayama and confirmed by my inquiries in 1962 was as follows: In the winter, such animals as had not been sent to pastures in Tibet were kept on the hills and in the valley close to the village of Tsharka, and fed on hay and barley-stalks. In the course of April they were taken to a pasture called Nubri some three miles from Tsharka and about 14,000 feet high. There they remained until the beginning of June when herdsmen and flocks moved to the high pastures of Dükung (15,000 feet) and some seven miles distant from Tsharka. They stayed there until late August and then moved down to Lanya, a pasture between Dükung and Nubri (14,500 feet). In mid-September they returned once more to Nubri where they stayed until mid-October. From then on, the cattle were kept at first near the village, where there was grazing on the harvested fields, and then once more on winter pastures. The first of these to be used was Tendi, in a broad valley, and in November the yak were driven up to Thazang which lies higher than Tendi. There the yak could find some dry grass even when there was already a good deal of snow. Despite the intense cold herdsmen stayed there in tents and sometimes they were even accompanied by their wives. In December the yak were brought down to a place called Mo only some three miles west of Tsharka. For the rest of the winter cattle and herdsmen moved about on other nearby, and relatively sheltered, pastures and when there was no other fodder the animals were fed with the hay and barley-stalks stored in the village.

There seem to be, however, some local variations and the cycle described by Takayama, and confirmed by my informants of Tsharka, differs from what David Snellgrove observed in Namdo.\* According to Snellgrove the whole land is completely barren from October to late May, 'and any livestock kept in the villages must be fed entirely with fodder stores from the last harvest'. The implication of Snellgrove's account is that the cattle-economy of Dolpo was absolutely dependent on the availability of winter pastures in Tibet, and in some parts of Dolpo it may indeed be impracticable

\* cf. *Four Lamas of Dolpo*, p. 6.

to keep any livestock during the winter within the confines of the village-land.

As long as the Tibetan frontier was open the people of many Dolpo villages sent their livestock for the winter months to the plains of Tibet, where the animals remained in the care of Drokpa herdsmen. They referred to these winter pastures as Changtang (northern plains) and the relationship and cooperation between Dolpo people and Drokpa herdsmen of certain families continued from generation to generation. Some of these Tibetan herdsmen came every autumn to the same Dolpo villages, bringing with them salt to barter for grain. When they returned they took with them whatever livestock their traditional trading friends gave into their care and for about four months they grazed these herds on the Tibetan plains. Some Dolpo villagers sent only their yak to Tibet but others also entrusted sheep and goats to Drokpa herdsmen and paid them agreed quantities of grain for the care of each animal. The Drokpas were also entitled to the milk of female animals, but had to return to the owners the skin of any animal which had perished. At that time there were many more sheep in Dolpo than when I visited the area; according to one of my informants 'every family owned at least 40, and rich men had flocks of up to 900 animals'.

The Chinese occupation of Tibet and the resulting restriction on border traffic deprived the people of Dolpo of their traditional winter pastures. The people of Eastern Dolpo have found no substitute for these winter pastures, but some of the villages of Western Dolpo have begun to move their yak southwards to pastures within the Tibrikot district. Thus in 1966 I found in the hills above Rimi and Chaurikot in the Jagdula valley some 500 yak belonging to people of Saldang. Herdsmen of Saldang had begun to take their yak to this area some six years previously while before 1959 they had been used to send their yak to Tibet. Some came alone, while others brought their women and children with them and spent the entire winter in the Rimi area. There was apparently no clash with the local people as the latter do not breed yak and thus had no need of the high hills for grazing. Previously the Saldang people also owned many sheep and these went to Tibet for the winter. They have had to give up the breeding of sheep, because the hills near Rimi were not suitable. Saldang lies in an area, the



Lubra village, Baragaon  
Houses in Lubra, Baragaon



Camp of yak-herds near Tsharka, Dolpo  
Stone enclosure for young animals in herdsmen's camp  
near Do, Dolpo



proper local name of which is Namgung, but to which the people of Rimi and Chaurikot refer as Tolwa.

The storing of hay is an essential feature of the pastoral economy of Dolpo. At the end of August men and women start cutting grass, first in the vicinity of the village wherever it has not been eaten by cattle. There are no walled-in and manured meadows such as in Khumbu, but as during the summer most of the animals are on the high pastures, some grass grows in the areas near the barley fields which are kept clear of cattle. Immediately after the harvest in early October, grass and weeds growing along the channels of the irrigated fields are cut, carried to the village and dried on the roofs of the village. Later there are expeditions to more distant areas and the cut hay is brought back on the backs of pack-yak. In Tsharka the villagers divide for these expeditions into groups and the choice of the areas to be allotted to each group for haymaking is decided by throwing dice. The hay is tied into bundles and these are stored on top of the piles of fire-wood which line the flat roof-tops. Each bundle is sufficient to feed a yak for nine to ten days.

In most parts of Dolpo there are also some winter pastures, but these cannot be used in years of heavy snowfall. If there is a shortage of hay only calves, some valuable cross-breeds, bulls and goats and sheep are kept in the village and fed on hay, but yak, which are more capable of fending for themselves, are taken to the winter pastures. During the winter months sheep are never milked but in normal years a little milk is drawn from some of the goats and female yak.

The use of pastures is well-regulated, and such devices as the throwing of dice or drawing of lots have been developed in order to guarantee a fair distribution of resources. No part of the pasture land is individually owned, nor are there private, walled-in meadows such as in Khumbu. Even the stone enclosures at the campsites, where calves and sheep are kept at night for reasons of safety, are community property and can be used by any villager camping there. Yet, though the boundaries of the pastures of the various villages are well-known and generally respected, disputes over grazing rights do occur.

Such a dispute had arisen in the year previous to my visit in 1962. The villages involved were Pungar, Shang (S.I.

Garenggaon) and Pinding (S.I. Pingring) in the Barbung valley. The three villages had originally shared certain pastures but the people of Pungar had not made use of them for many years. At the time of the influx of the large herds of Tibetan refugees, and the resultant pressure on pasture land, some herdsmen of Pungar drove several hundred of their yak to the pastures which they considered their joint property, traditionally held in common with Shang and Pinding. But the latter resisted this move – presumably because of the general shortage of grazing – attacked the herdsmen and drove the Pungar yak into a grassless valley, where more than 200 are alleged to have perished. One of the Pungar men who told me of the incident had lost 68 out of the 81 yak he had owned but it was not clear whether this was entirely due to the action of Shang and Pinding or whether the animals had already been weakened by the general shortage of fodder. The mediation by neutral village headmen was only partly successful and relations between the villages remained tense. The people themselves claimed that the incident was unprecedented, and it is fair to assume that it would never have occurred without the general disruption of pastoral life caused by the invasion of Dolpo by multitudes of Tibetan refugees and their cattle.

The Bhotias of Dolpo use their yak in much the same way as the Sherpas. Both populations depend for the protein content of their diet largely on dairy products. In their summer camps on the high pastures the Dolpo people have only limited quantities of grain, made for the most part into roasted meal (*tsampa*) and eaten with buttermilk and curd. Much of the milk is used for making butter and the most common method is to pour the milk into a leather bag which is then suspended on crossed poles and swung backwards and forwards until lumps of butter have formed. The advantage of this method compared to the making of butter in the heavy churns used by Sherpas is the ease with which such bags can be packed up and moved from camp to camp.

The hair of yak is spun and used for the weaving of blankets and yak hides provide the greater part of the leather required by the people of Dolpo.

Yak serve also as pack animals. They carry the tents, equipment

and food supplies of herdsmen, and traders going either to Tibet or to the lower regions of Thak Khola and Tichurong transport their goods mainly on the backs of yak.

Sheep are valued for the sake of their wool, and both sheep and goats are a source of milk and meat. A typical scene to be observed in villages as well as temporary camps is the milking of sheep and goats, fettered together in long double rows. The animals are tied together, head to head, and the milkers, who are mostly men, move with their pails from animal to animal. The milk of ewes and goats is used in the same way as yak milk but butter made from such milk fetches a slightly lower price than yak butter.

Sheep are shorn in June and most of the wool is processed in Dolpo. Both men and women can be seen spinning whenever they are not engaged in more demanding work. Even when men gather to discuss village affairs or to settle a dispute some bring their spindles and go on spinning as they listen to arguments or join in the debate. The looms on which the women weave blankets, cloaks and aprons are stretch-looms which can be rolled up when not in use. Nearly all weaving is done out of doors, both in the villages and in camps on the summer pastures.

Castrated male sheep and goats are also used as pack animals for the transport of grain and salt, the only commodities which can be easily divided into small loads suitable for these animals. Each animal carries two bags, securely fastened, and the maximum load for a strong animal is 30 lbs. Traders take large flocks of pack-sheep and goats on long journeys, but the progress of such caravans is slow because the animals must be allowed time for grazing.

The number of horses kept by men of Dolpo is small and they are used exclusively for riding, and not for the carrying of loads. Mules and donkeys, which are plentiful in Thak Khola and Lo, do not seem suitable for the climate and altitude of Dolpo.

The people of Baragaon and Lo are much less dependent on the breeding of livestock than the largely pastoral inhabitants of Dolpo. In both these regions agriculture in irrigated fields provides the population with the bulk of their food supply and herding is a subsidiary branch of their economy. Most Baragaonlis keep common cattle, yak-cattle hybrids, sheep and goats. Some villagers used also to keep yak and grazed them during the summer months on high pastures, but by 1962 they had lost most of their yak largely.

due to the action of bands of Khambas who, after failing in their struggle against the Chinese, had crossed with their arms into Nepal. They were a law to themselves and, having to live on the land, played havoc with the cattle of the local inhabitants. In Baragaon and Lo, as well as in Dolpo, the villagers were loud in their complaints against Khamba cattle-thieves, and yak which roamed on high pastures were more vulnerable to raiding Khambas than domestic animals kept in and about settlements. Most village communities of Baragaon had cooperative arrangements for the herding of cattle. Thus in Lubra, a village of a dozen houses in a side valley about an hour's walk from the Kali Gandaki, the herding of cattle was taken in turn. Every day two households had to provide one herdsboy or, failing a young boy, a girl or even an adult to graze the cows of all the villagers, about thirty animals altogether. The animals were driven back to the village every night. To guard the flock of some 180 goats, belonging to different owners, the village employed then a Drokpa herdsman settled in Lubra.

In the villages of Baragaon cross-breeds are kept as plough animals as well as for carrying loads. Mules and donkeys also serve as pack animals, and their numbers are large. Thus the people of Tangbe, a village active in trade, owned in 1962 a total of over 100 mules. Similarly, hundreds of goats are kept as pack animals rather than for the sale of their meat and milk. In Thak Khola and Lo, as indeed further to the west in the region of the Bheri valley and throughout the Karnali zone caravans of load-carrying goats and sheep are a familiar sight.

The men of Baragaon are keen horsemen and most reasonably well-off men own and breed ponies. Great importance is attached to saddle-covers and other trappings, and on festive occasions riders and horses are gorgeously attired, the riders wearing brocade and fur-trimmed silk gowns and their mounts being no less colourfully turned out. No item in the Baragaonlis' domestic furniture compares in quality and aesthetic merit with their valuable Tibetan saddle-covers, made of the finest carpets, and it is not unusual to see expensive woven material, usually used for women's skirts, serving as an underlay of the saddle. The influence of Tibetan nomads, whose tent life offers little scope for other kinds of display, may be responsible for the local Bhotias' emphasis on the appear-

ance of their ponies. The principal occasion for the display of ceremonial clothes and the equestrian trappings is the Muktinath fair in September, when bands of riders from all the villages of Baragaon ride to the fairground and temples in solemn procession. Afterwards they compete in horse races which are as loosely organized as they are gay and colourful. Not more than five and usually only two or three ponies race at a time, galloping from the starting point, where hundreds of onlookers assemble, along a course which has no definite finishing line. Many of the riders fall from their ponies, and although they usually jump up and remount, I have seen riders knocked unconscious by a fall on the stony ground.

The racing, which involves neither betting nor prizes, is mainly for entertainment and part of the jollification of the fair. The public display of the ponies' qualities, moreover, attracts attention to those proving particularly fast and untiring, and helps an owner intent on selling a pony to obtain a good price.

In the villages of Lo, goats are the most numerous domestic animals. They alone can fend for themselves in an area as arid as this region north of the Himalayan main range, where the scarcity of fodder sets narrow limits to the number of cows and cross-breeds a family can maintain. Yak used to be kept on the high hills surrounding Lo and I was told that before the influx of Tibetan refugees and their herds there were about 500-600 yak in the whole of Lo. As in Dolpo the herds were decimated as a result of the overgrazing of pastures by the refugees' cattle, and Khamba marauders took a toll of those left. Horses are kept for riding, male *dzo*, mules and donkeys for the transport of loads.

### *Trading patterns*

The trade of Thak Khola and the adjoining regions of Lo and Dolpo used to be dominated by the Thakalis, but the dwindling of trans-Himalayan trade due to the occupation of Tibet by Chinese forces in 1959 has caused a shift of the remaining trade from big merchants to smaller operators, many of whom are not Thakalis. The prosperity of the Thakalis, which was unequalled by that of any other ethnic group in comparable regions of Nepal, derived mainly from their skill and success as traders. While there have

always been a good many Thakalis who depended for their subsistence on agriculture and spend most of their energy on the tillage of their land, such farmers could never have created the wealth on which the highly civilized style of living of the great merchant families of Tukche was based. This style becomes apparent as soon as one enters their houses, which impressed Tucci so much that he referred to them as 'palaces'.\* They are of a size, architectural standard and quality of interior decoration most uncommon in the hills of Nepal and surpassed only by the houses of some of the rich Sherpa traders of Solu.

The opportunity for a trade which brought great wealth to some and a generally high standard to the majority of the Thakalis of Thaksatsae derives from the geographical position of their habitat. Thaksatsae lies on one of the easiest routes leading from Tibet across Nepal to the plains of Northern India. The passes between Lo and Tibet are comparatively low and easily negotiable for pack animals of all types, and the route running south to Pokhara and the Terai bypasses narrow gorges such as elsewhere impede the use of beasts of burden. Thaksatsae, moreover, lies at a point on this route most favourable for the establishment of an entrepôt trade. As far as Thaksatsae, situated at an average altitude of 7,800 feet, Tibetans from across the international frontier as well as Bhotias from Lo and Dolpo can come with their caravans of yak and cross-breeds without exposing themselves and their animals to the unaccustomed heat of the lower regions, while except during two or three winter months the climate and height of the area do not create any hardship for the thinly clad folk from the middle-ranges of Nepal. Thaksatsae is thus the obvious point for an exchange of goods coming from the north against the products of southern regions, as well as the shifting of merchandise from one means of transport to the other. The respective climates of the Tibetan highland and the lower regions of Nepal are, moreover, so constituted that the arrival of the goods from both directions cannot always be coordinated. The tracks from Thaksatsae towards the south become impassable for pack animals and difficult for porters during the monsoon months, whereas just at that time travel through the arid valleys of Lo and across the passes to Dolpo and Tibet is easy and comparatively comfortable. Conversely, the

\* op. cit., p. 28.

winter months are unsuitable for journeys to Tibet or Dolpo, while at that time travellers through the lower Kali Gandaki valley find their progress unimpeded by swollen streams and sodden paths. Hence there is a natural need for the storage of goods somewhere at the border of the two geographical and climatic zones, and the Thakalis have made use of this need to establish themselves as middlemen who purchase, and if necessary store, the merchandise reaching their area from north and south. We have seen that there were times when the government of Nepal granted individual Thakalis a monopoly on the handling of this trade, but the geographical factors are so favourable to the Thakalis that even without such governmental control a large share of the profits from all commerce along the Kali Gandaki route would have flowed into the pockets of traders determined to exploit the strategic position of Thaksatsae.

Even before political events in Tibet had disrupted trade with Nepal, there occurred a decrease in the Thakalis' share in the border trade. Prosperity and success developed during the years of their monopoly on the salt-trade freed the wealthier among the Thakalis from the necessity to travel themselves to Tibet. While they continued to act as middlemen, the movement of goods between Thaksatsae and Tibet largely fell into the hands of the hardier people of Lo and Baragaon.

The considerable capital accumulated by Thakali merchants enabled them, however, to engage in profitable trade deals even without braving the risks and discomforts of long journeys on foot and horseback. Based on their houses in Thaksatsae they dealt in a variety of commodities from grain and salt to cloth and cigarettes. In 1962 I found that quite apart from the big merchants of the *subba* family there were men of medium wealth whose business had an annual turnover of between R25,000 and 50,000. In the village of Kobang there was an open shop with an annual turnover of R25,000 and a trader in Narchung, who kept a shop and dealt also in horses, reckoned on a turnover of up to R30,000. Men who went to Kalimpong and other places in India to purchase goods for sale in Thak Khola expected to make a profit of about R4000 on the sale of goods bought for R15,000.

Though the respective rôles of the various agents in the trade along the Kali Gandaki have changed from time to time, its basic

pattern has largely remained the same. It will therefore be useful to outline this basic pattern before we consider the handling of individual commodities, discuss the fluctuation of prices and exchange rates, and assess the readjustments forced upon the people of Thak Khola by the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

The two commodities, the exchange of which has always been the mainstay of the trade along the Kali Gandaki route, as well as in many other areas on the Nepal-Tibet border, are salt and grain. Salt, collected from salt-lakes of Tibet, was exchanged for grain grown mainly in the lower regions of Nepal. This barter-trade usually involved several phases, each handled by a separate agent. Petty traders of Dolpo and Lo travelled with yak, cross-breeds or pack-goats and sheep, laden with grain, to villages in the border area of Tibet, such as Mango-tsora, six to seven days' journey from Tsharka. There they exchanged their grain against salt brought by Drokpa caravans from the distant salt-lakes far north of the Tsangpo, and according to the law of demand and supply the exchange rate fluctuated considerably. There was a time when the Tibetan authorities permitted only traders from Lo and Dolpo to purchase salt in Tibet, while those from regions further south were allowed to trade in wool and livestock, but not in salt. Some of these traders brought the salt as far south as Tukche, while others bartered it for grain at Mustang where traders from Baragaon obtained most of their supplies.

Takayama, who was able to observe the traditional trading activities of the people of Tsharka before their routine had been disrupted by political events in Tibet, describes the movements of Tsharka traders during the summer and autumn of 1958. Although a few individuals went to Tibet in twos and threes, the main caravans were cooperative enterprises of villagers travelling in large groups in order to be able to defend themselves against robbers. On the 12th August of that year such a caravan of 20 men with about 135 yak set out for Muglang in Tibet. A skilful man can manage 10 pack animals, and even a less experienced man can look after 6. The caravan carried barley as well as cash, to be exchanged for salt, wool and butter. On the way to Tibet the caravan used traditional camp-sites, and on the Tibetan side of the route frontier the Dolpo traders paid the local Tibetans a



small fee for allowing them to graze their yak. For the return journey they divided into two groups, and these arrived at Tsharka on the 28th and 29th August.

For the following nine days they stayed in the village and celebrated their return with drinking and merrymaking. On the 7th September they set out for Tukche, carrying in addition to Tibetan salt some butter and dried cheese (*churbi*) produced in Tsharka. In Tukche they exchanged these commodities for rice, barley and other grain. In Tibet the exchange rate salt: barley was at that time  $3\frac{1}{2}:1$ , in Tukche it was  $2:1$ , and for butter: rice it was  $1:5$ , while in Tukche it was  $1:9$ . The differences constituted the traders' profit. The Tsharka men returned from Tukche in three groups, arriving on the 18th, 19th and 20th September respectively.

While the main caravan had been to Tukche three other men of Tsharka went to trade in Tibet, and on their return they too carried their goods to Tukche. When going to Tukche with yak carrying salt, traders also took some yak without loads, for as salt was normally more valuable than the grain they carried in exchange, additional pack animals were required for the return journey to carry the extra weight.

In the same year smaller caravans of Tsharka men went to Dangardzong in Baragaon, and exchanged there Tibetan salt for grain. While the return journey to Tukche takes 17 to 18 days, the trip to Dangardzong can be completed in thirteen to fourteen days.

The salt sold to Thakali merchants by people of Dolpo, Lo or Baragaon was stored at Tukche until growers of grain from the lower regions arrived with their produce to exchange it for salt, or Thakali merchants transported the salt on the backs of mules, donkeys and porters to such centres of trade as Baglung or Pokhara. The rates of exchange have always differed according to the locality where the barter-deal took place, and to the law of supply and demand, while the profits of the individual trader depend on his skill in manipulating these fluctuations.

Immediately after the imposition of Chinese control over Tibet, the salt-trade dwindled, but by 1966 when I returned to the region yak caravans from Dolpo villages were again plying between the

Tibetan border villages where the imported salt was exchanged for grain. Thus in August 1965 men of Mukot went with their yak to Mango-tsora in Tibet and bartered the barley and buckwheat they had taken for salt. The exchange rate was 2 measures salt for 1 *ua*-barley,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  salt for 1 *jau*-barley, and  $1-1\frac{1}{2}$  salt for 1 buckwheat. In the same summer a caravan of 100 pack-yak of Mukot went to Lo and exchanged *ua*-barley and *jau*-barley at slightly more favourable rates for salt, which local traders had brought from Tibet. The salt brought by these two caravans was not taken to Tukche but sold in villages in the Barung valley south-west of Mukot.

Much of the Tibetan salt brought by the caravans of Dolpo, Lo and Baragaon, however, was sold to Thakali merchants of Tukche and stored in their houses until growers of grain from the lower regions arrived with their produce to exchange it for salt, or the merchants could arrange for the transport of the salt to such trade centres as Pokhara or Baglung. The Tukche-Pokhara route was mainly worked by caravans of mules and ponies owned by Baragaonlis. Usually there was one man for six or seven mules or ponies, and the same caravan which carried salt as far as Pokhara returned with loads of grain. This was taken by mules only as far as Tukche and was there repacked into smaller bags suitable for transport by goats and sheep. The load of one mule was divided among four goats or sheep belonging usually to the same man who owned the mules. The movements of mules and goats were coordinated in such a way that neither had to be kept idle at Tukche. In May 1962 large stores of grain had been accumulated at Tatopani and mule and pony caravans brought these up to Tukche, whence goats took the grain to Baragaon and Lo. During the monsoon when the Tukche-Pokhara route became impassable for pack animals the same mules were used on the stretch between Thaksatsae and Mustang.

Wool as well as live sheep and goats ranked next to salt on the list of exports from Tibet to Nepal. The wool was invariably sold in Indian markets, whereas sheep and goats were taken to the middle-ranges or even as far as the Terai and sold wherever there was a demand. Neither of these commodities lend themselves to a straight exchange comparable to that of salt against grain, and their price was usually expressed in money. The goods which traders from Thak Khola took to Tibet and sold there to pay for

their purchases of wool and livestock were partly of Nepalese and partly of Indian origin. Apart from food-grains of all sorts, they included sugar, tea, spices, tobacco, cigarettes, paper, cotton cloths and, in later years, a great variety of manufactured articles from razor-blades to electric batteries.

Trade in the latter commodities was often handled by a single merchant, who bought goods in India, arranged for their transport to Thaksatsae and then travelled with them to Lo or one of the Tibetan border villages. With the money received from their sale he bought commodities such as wool, and this he transported to the Indo-Nepal border and sold it to agents of Indian textile mills. In such cases the purchase of goods from Tibetan suppliers or producers, their transport across the whole breadth of Nepal, and their sale to the Indian consumer might be in the hands of a single Thakali trader based on the midway station and entrepôt of Tukche.

While considerable quantities of barley grown in Baragaon and Panchgaon were annually bartered for Tibetan salt, the part played in this trade by the products of Thaksatsae had always been small. Some barley grown by the villagers of Thaksatsae might find its way to Tibet, but not because the growers had a surplus of food-grain available for export but because they preferred to sell barley to Tibet and purchase rice from the lower regions. The rôle of the Thakalis was principally that of middlemen and it was significant that these middlemen had risen to power and prosperity, whereas the producers of grain in Nepal and of salt, wool and sheep in Tibet had never attained an economic standard comparable to that of the Thakalis.

### *The mechanics of the salt-trade*

Basically the exchange of Tibetan salt for Nepalese grain has remained the same throughout the ages. Neither commodity is subject to changes in taste or fashion, or capable of substantial modification by producer or middleman. This constancy in quality and the ease with which both salt and grain can be handled and measured make both commodities ideal objects for the barter trade of small operators, for neither purchase nor storage and transport require specialist skill.

The organization of this simple exchange of two essential commodities has nevertheless undergone far-reaching changes, and we have seen that the major phases in the recent history of Thak Khola were determined by developments in the control of the salt-trade. Let us briefly recapitulate. Until 1850 no customs duty was levied on the import of salt by the government of Nepal, but the people of Thaksatsae paid a consolidated tax of R12,500 in return for which they were free to trade in salt without any restrictions. In 1860 this system was abolished and thereafter the government of Nepal auctioned a customs contract including the monopoly of the trade in Tibetan salt in Thak Khola. The first customs contractor paid an annual royalty of R44,500 and during the years 1860-1932 this monopoly was the subject of keen competition between big Thakali merchants as well as a few outsiders. At the end of the nineteenth century the annual royalty paid by the contractor to the government was R140,000, but the trade must have gradually declined when, in the lower ranges, Indian salt began to compete with Tibetan salt. By the time this happened, great fortunes had been made and there can be little doubt that the wealth of the *subba* family of Tukche stems largely from their successful handling of the salt monopoly.

The monopoly of the customs contractor did not apply to all phases of the salt-trade, there were always small traders who operated the sections of the route north of Tukche. While in those days the Tibetan salt-markets were open only to traders from the border districts of Lo and Dolpo, the Nepalese authorities did not allow Tibetans to carry further south than to the villages of Lo. Salt-traders from Lo and Dolpo were allowed only as far as Tukche, where they had to sell their salt to the customs contractor, while people from Baragaon and Panchgaon were permitted to carry salt as far south as Dana, where there was another customs post. An order (*sanad*) issued by Jang Bahadur Rana in 1861 enumerated the complicated rules which govern the relations between the customs contractor and the people of Thak Khola engaged in the salt-trade. It contained the following clause: 'Thakalis taking salt on pack animals must sell it at the Dana customs house at the current rate. They may then take their animals further down to bring up rice, and on this they must pay the usual duty. Anyone who makes one journey carrying salt is allowed to make two

journeys carrying rice. The Dana customs office will not allow anyone to make more journeys.' In another clause it was stated explicitly that the Thakalis would not be allowed to take salt further south than Dana and would have to trade exclusively with the customs contractor and not make any trade deals with people from the lower regions who came to Thaksatsae to buy salt. Those leaving Thak Khola while going on trading trips or pilgrimage or to attend a court of law, were granted the concession of being allowed to take with them 5 *pathi* (20 lbs) of salt per household. The *sanad* concluded with the warning that anyone who was found carrying salt over a prohibited route would be fined 'according to the customs regulations'. It appears that at that time the inhabitants of Thaksatsae were allowed to import unlimited amounts of Tibetan salt for their domestic use, and were subject to customs control only when they left Thaksatsae on journeys to the south. As the order was addressed to the '*mukhya* (headmen) and people of Thak' it did not contain rules regarding the salt-trade of people from Dolpo, Lo, Baragaon and Panchgaon, but it would seem that any salt brought by such traders had to be sold to the customs contractor.

The customs contractors' income from the salt monopoly had to be large enough to enable them to pay the government an annual royalty of up to Rs 140,000. It seems, however, that even after paying this large sum, great profits remained, and hence there was keen competition for the contract. The accumulation of great fortunes by the customs contractors is not surprising if we consider that at one time, the contractor would buy the salt brought to Tukche by Baragaonlis at a rate of 32 lbs per rupee and sell the same salt to people of lower regions, who had come to Tukche, at a rate of 10 lbs per rupee.

The abolition of the salt monopoly in 1928 (see p. 146) meant not only that the royalty previously paid to the government no longer flowed out of Thak Khola, but also that the profits made by the contractor were now spread among a large number of Thakali families. In the 1950s and early 1960s there was hardly a household which did not have some share in the salt-trade. Rich men would buy and sell about 100-120 *muri*\* per year, while traders of more modest means would sell between 60-80 *muri*. Normally these

\* 1 *muri* corresponds to 2.4 bushels.

transactions did not involve any journeys, for people from Lo and Baragaon brought the salt to Tukche and received grain in exchange, while people from as far as Lamjung, Kunsu, Baglung and Gulmi came to Thaksatsae to exchange grain for salt.

The rate of exchange between grain and salt varies according to the location of the transaction quite apart from the fluctuations of the market caused by occasional shortages of the one or other commodity. Until 1959 the exchange rate salt:barley in Tukche was 2:1, whereas in June 1962 11 to 12 measures of salt were exchanged for 10 measures of barley. At that time the following rates of barter prevailed in Tibet: *ua*-barley:salt 10:26; *jau*-barley:salt 10:13; and rice:salt 1:5. A local shortage of salt due to the blockage of the route to Tibet by Khamba brigands, had then reversed the ratio in Dolpo and in June 1962 salt was sold there for three times the quantity of *ua*-barley in Do village and as much as three and a half times the quantity of *ua*-barley in Mukot. This, however, was only a temporary development and prices found a more normal level when trade with Tibet revived. Before the threat of Khambas had prevented the Dolpo traders from going to Tibet, they bartered *ua*-barley there for three to four times the quantity of salt, while the exchange rate in Dolpo villages such as Tsharka and Do was  $1\frac{1}{4}$ –2 measures of salt for 1 of *ua*-barley.

The price of salt expressed in rupees rose steadily with the devaluation of the Nepalese rupee, and the extraordinary rise of prices in Thak Khola during the 1960s. Old Thakalis remember a time when R1 would buy 4 *pathi* of salt, and until 1958 1 *pathi* of salt cost about R2. In 1961 the price of salt in Tukche had risen to R12 per *pathi*, but by June 1962 it had come down to R7 and two months later the arrival of new supplies from Tibet had caused the price to drop to R5½.

The improvement of communications in the southern and middle regions of Nepal inevitably worked to the disadvantage of the trade in Tibetan salt in the competition with Indian sea salt. Until the late 1950s Tibetan salt could still compete with Indian salt in the regions of Pokhara and Baglung, but in 1962 Indian salt was sold in Pokhara at the rate of R8 per *pathi* and in Baglung at the rate of R10, while Tibetan salt cost R14 to 15 per *pathi* by the time it reached either place. Only the fact that it has always been considered superior to Indian salt secured it a limited market at

this high price. But the recent construction of a motor-road linking Pokhara with the Terai and the Indian road system has brought large quantities of cheap Indian salt right into the middle-ranges, virtually excluding Tibetan salt at least from the Pokhara region. The great merchant families of Tukche had long realized this inescapable trend and looked outside Thak Khola for new sources of wealth. In 1962 they still bought and sold Tibetan salt but the average annual turnover of each of the *subba* amounted to no more than 1200–1500 *pathi*, while even traders of lesser status still handled about 700–800 *pathi* per year. For the small trader of Lo, Dolpo and Baragaon, and particularly the ordinary farmer who engages only occasionally in the barter transactions, the salt-trade remained, however, of vital importance. For it was mainly this trade which enabled him to acquire such victuals as rice, tea and sugar. The temporary break in communications with Tibet hit these occasional traders most severely and in outlying areas such as Dolpo led to a lowering of an already low standard of living. While the resumption of salt exports from Tibet resolved that specific crisis, the gradual expansion of the area with easy access to Indian salt supplies creates an increasing threat to the economy of the traditional operators of the trade in Tibetan salt.

### *Trade in wool*

Tibet was for a long time one of the main sources of the wool processed in India and one of the routes along which supplies of Tibetan wool filtered through the Himalayan barrier, led through Tukche. Thakali traders whose contacts reached from Lo to the plains of Northern India, were virtually the only operators of this trade but the quantities they handled were not great in relation to the total volume of the Indo-Tibetan wool-trade. Yet, their profits contributed in no mean measure to the prosperity of Tukche, the main centre of this trade. In the 1930s when the customs post was situated at Netsung in Lo, Thakali traders would go there in the months of May and June to meet regular trade partners coming from nearby villages as well as from Tibet. They would learn what supplies were available and agree on a price. In the time between July and October they would then take caravans of yak-cattle cross-breeds and mules to Netsung and purchase the agreed

quantities of wool. Payment was invariably made in cash. The stocks available amounted usually to about 2000 maunds,\* but even if greater quantities were available Thakali traders would buy up the entire stock.

My Thakali informants insisted that although several traders would go to Netsung together 'as friends but not as partners', they would not bid against each other, but amicably share in the available stock, some purchasing 50 maunds, some 100 and some even more. In this way they prevented a rise in price which, had they bid against each other, might have reduced the profit margin to a point where the trade in wool would no longer have been rewarding.

From Netsung the wool was taken to Tukche on the backs of *dzo* or mules. There it was transferred to porters who carried it to Butwal. The short stretch from Butwal to the railhead at Nautanwa was completed by bullock-cart and at Nautanwa agents of the Kanpur mills took over the wool. Sometimes they paid the purchase price at once and sometimes the Thakali traders travelled with them to Kanpur and received payment there.

This procedure was not the only one adopted in the wool-trade, nor was it followed in quite the same way in the 1960s. Some of the rich men of Tukche had permanent agents in Lo who came to see them at the beginning of the summer to report on the state of the wool market. With these men of Lo the Tukche merchants sent the money for the purchase of an agreed quantity of wool, and the agents stored the wool until such time as cheap, reliable transport to Tukche became available. The wool had to reach Tukche before the middle of November, the time when the movement of goods to the lower regions began. The agents residing in Lo were either paid a fixed commission or given a share in the profits. Some Thakali merchants went themselves to Lo and placed sums of money with local traders to be spent on the purchase of wool up to an agreed maximum price. The wool so purchased was delivered at Tukche some time in the early autumn.

The price of wool, like that of all other commodities, has steadily risen. In the 1930s the Thakali traders paid R24 to R25 per maund (80 lbs) in Netsung and sold it for R60 to R75 in Nautanwa. The transport from Netsung to Tukche cost them about R3½ per

\* 1 maund equals 80 lbs.



Girl of Tsharka spinning wool



Man of Tsharka village





Women of Tsharka weaving yak-hair blankets  
Men of Tsharka loading yak

maund, and that from Tukche to Butwal R8 to R10, while the cost of cart hire from Butwal to Nautanwa worked out to R $\frac{1}{4}$  per maund. Moreover customs duty of R2 at Kagbeni and another R2 at Nautanwa had to be paid by the Thakali traders. In 1962 the price of wool in Thak Khola was R240 per maund and the cost of transport to the Indian border amounted to R50. At Nautanwa it sold at Indian R400 but some Thakalis took it by rail to Indian markets where it fetched an even higher price. There were two or three years (1957-9) when it was profitable to take the wool to Kalimpong, paying the freight of Indian R25 per maund. In the 1960s an average of R600,000 worth of wool was being annually sold to India by Thakali traders. The greater part of this came from Tibet and only a small part was the wool of sheep bred by the people of Lo and Dolpo. The conflict between India and China in 1962 resulted in an Indian embargo on the entry of all goods of Chinese origin and this applied also to Tibetan wool. Coupled with Chinese restrictions on the flow of trade across the Tibet-Nepal border, this ban led to a sharp decline in the wool-trade along the Kali Gandaki route.

### *Trade in livestock and animal produce*

As long as there was unimpeded traffic across the Tibetan border the volume of trade in sheep and goats nearly equalled the imports of Tibetan wool. According to the traders of Tukche about 20,000 sheep and goats passed every year through Thak Khola. Most of them came from Tibet, but some had been bred in Lo and Dolpo. Until 1959 people of Lo, Baragaon, Panchgaon and, to a lesser extent, even Thaksatsae, used to go regularly to Tibet and purchase substantial numbers of sheep and goats. In the month of September these were driven to Tukche, where most were bought up by Thakali traders, and temporarily kept in Thaksatsae. Customers from Baglung and Pokhara came then to Tukche to purchase such animals, and only sheep and goats which could not be sold advantageously to these customers were driven further south, and disposed of either in the middle-ranges or in the Terai, where at the time of the Hindu festival of Dassain there is always a heavy demand for sacrificial animals.

When in 1959 the Chinese restricted the export of livestock from

Tibet very few sheep and goats came across the border, and as supplies from Lo and Dolpo could not meet the demand, prices rose to unprecedented heights. As traders used to calculate profits the Thakalis have a good memory for prices and there is little doubt that the figures they gave me in 1962 were reasonably accurate. Until 1945 a full-grown goat could be bought in Tukche for R2½, but by 1958 this price had risen to R40. At the time when Tibetan refugees had to dispose of the flocks they had brought with them to Nepal, the price of sheep and goats dropped to about R30. But by 1961 the stock of the refugees was exhausted and as no new supplies of goats and sheep arrived from Tibet, the price of goats and sheep rose steeply.

Throughout the summer months of 1962 a small-scale trade in sheep and goats was carried on by people of Thak Khola who undertook the strenuous journey to Dolpo, there bought sheep and goats at an average price of R50 and later sold them in Tukche and other Thakali villages for about R70. At the end of September a total of about 2,000 sheep and goats passed through Thak Khola. Three Thakali traders of Tukche had each bought several hundred sheep from Dolpo and sold them at a fair profit to customers from the lower regions, who had come to Tukche to obtain sacrificial animals for Dassain. At the same time men of various villages of Baragaon drove flocks of sheep and goats to Jomosom. They consisted mainly of old animals which had served their owners for several years, carrying loads of salt and grain, and giving wool and milk. In Jomosom men from the lower regions were already waiting for such sheep and goats, but whereas the sellers demanded R80 for a sheep and up to R100 for a goat, the purchasers did not want to pay more than R50 or 60 for such animals. After much haggling many compromise bargains were struck, but there were also prospective buyers who returned empty-handed because they were unwilling to pay the inflated prices. They maintained that even the previous year they had been able to buy sheep at a more reasonable price. Yet those Thakalis who had brought sheep and goats of good quality from Dolpo succeeded in selling their entire stock.

Dolpo is also a regular source of supply of yak to villages of Baragaon. Like sheep and goat these animals are purchased exclusively for slaughter, but unlike them they are never taken as far south as Thaksatsae. For the Thakalis have given up the eating of

yak and the Bhotias of Baragaon are now the main consumers of yak meat. Thakalis have no scruples, however, about buying yak in Dolpo and selling the animals in Baragaon, knowing that they will be killed. Only old yak, and mainly castrated males, are sold by Dolpo people for this purpose and their price varied in 1962 between R300 and R350. Payment was always made in cash and in view of the difficult trek, which involves the crossing of several passes more than 18,000 feet high, many traders from Baragaon take only cash and a few small articles of little weight to Dolpo. Yet it is not unusual for such a trader to buy as many as ten to twelve yak on a single journey to Dolpo. A few of the yak are driven annually from Dolpo to Thak Khola and passed on to Nye-Shang (Manangbhot), but the majority are slaughtered in Baragaon.

Quite different in character is the import into Thak Khola of cross-breeds from Solu, a region of Eastern Nepal. Many of the hybrids used in Thak Khola as pack animals or yoked to the ploughs, were purchased in Solu. Though the people of the Nandong area of Dolpo also breed hybrids and the people of Thak Khola obtain some of their male *dzo* from that source, the hybrids bred by the Sherpas of Solu are considered superior and used to fetch a high price. The operators of this trade were mainly from Baragaon but a few Dolpo men have also been to Solu carrying large amounts of cash. The traders travelled via Pokhara and Kathmandu to Solu and there they bought from the local Sherpas up to forty cross-breeds at a time. They then engaged two or three Sherpas to help them drive the animals to Thak Khola. As the lower route through the middle-ranges of Nepal is impracticable for *dzo*, they drove them up to Khumbu and across the Nangpa La to Tibet. Inside Tibet they travelled through comparatively flat and easy country and re-entered Nepal near Mustang. The Chinese occupation of Tibet has blocked this route and *dzo* from Solu can no longer be taken to Thak Khola. In the Dolpo village of Tsharka I heard a song which praises the looks and character of the Solu cross-breeds but comments on the difficulty and length of the journey to Solu.

In the summer of 1962 two separate groups of traders from Baragaon undertook the purchase of male *dzo* in Solu. One of

the groups operated with a capital of R10,000 provided by a man of Lubra village, who had a 50 per cent share in the profits and losses of the venture and received, moreover, 10 per cent interest on the capital lent to his partners. The latter, a man of Purang village, travelled to Solu and acted as chief negotiator. He was accompanied by two helpers, necessary for driving the animals to Thak Khola, and these were given their food and two animals each as a wage. This group purchased *dzo* for R150 each in Solu and expected to sell them at an average rate of R400 in Baragaon. But in the end they failed to obtain the necessary permits for the transit of their animals through Chinese territory and, having driven their herd on Nepalese soil as far as Kuti, had to sell them there at a very small profit.

Apart from live animals and wool, various kinds of animal produce used to be imported from Tibet, but it would seem that the Chinese authorities, though permitting the export of salt and wool, discourage the trade in livestock, butter, dried meat and hides. Until 1958 the people of Lo bought butter, dried meat and sheepskins either from Tibetans, who brought these products across the border, or purchased them in the course of their own trade journeys to Tibet. Some of the butter was resold to Thakalis who bought it mainly for their own consumption as an additive to Tibetan tea, and for use in Buddhist ritual. The people of Dolpo also brought butter to Thak Khola, but the quantities involved were not great. Since the decline of the salt-trade they have less frequent occasion to travel to Tukche and hence find it more convenient to sell part of their surplus of butter to their trade partners in the Tichurong area. Yet, in September 1962 men of Tsharka came with about twenty pack-yak to Marpha, bringing butter which they exchanged at a rate of 1 measure of butter for 9 of *ua*-barley.

The skins of newly born lambs are used in Thak Khola as linings of coats, but while in the old days the supply was plentiful and one skin cost only R $\frac{1}{2}$ , very few lambskins have reached the Thak area in recent years.

A minor item of trade is the dried cheese known as *churbi*. This by-product of the milk is used only by Bhotia populations and small quantities reach Baragaon from Lo and Dolpo.

## The financing of trade

As long as trade is only by barter there is no need for complex systems of finance. Trading partners confident of each other's reliability may give goods on credit but such transactions mean little more than an agreed delay in the completion of a barter deal between two parties. With the introduction of cash there arises, however, the possibility of a man borrowing money from one person in order to be able to enter into a trade deal with a third party. A trader setting out on a journey which offers opportunities greater than his capital resources allow him to grasp is tempted to borrow cash from friends against the promise of repayment and either a share of the envisaged profits or a fixed rate of interest.

The Thakalis operate a system of credit known as *dhigur* which is a rotating credit association admirably adjusted to the needs of traders who are often faced by the need for relatively large cash sums, but do not enjoy the facilities of regular banking. The *dhigur* system is based on the voluntary cooperation of a number of investors prepared to advance capital to a friend or business associate on the understanding that within a foreseeable period they will be repaid their contribution plus a substantial interest. The risk of the transaction is reduced by spreading it among a fairly large circle of contributors.

How does it work? The hypothetical example of a *dhigur* of minimal extent will demonstrate the system:

A *dhigur* is formed by four friends with the purpose of providing one of them with a capital sum repayable in four years' time. In the initial year, A, B and C pay R100 each, and the collected sum of R300 is handed over to D who uses it to finance a small trading venture. Next year B, C and D pay each R110 and the total of R330 is given to A. In the third year, C, D and A pay each R121 and the total of R363 is given to B. In the fourth and last year of the duration of the *dhigur*, D, A and B each pay R133.3 and the total of R400 is given to C. The original beneficiary (D), for whose sake the *dhigur* was created, thus pays R63 interest for the principal of R300 which he received in the first year, while C, the last of the partners to receive a payment, makes a profit of R69 on his total investment of R331.

Most *dhigur* involve the cooperation of a much larger number of participants and extend over a much longer period of time. The interval between the rounds of payments, however, need not be necessarily one year, but may be only six months. The sums paid out in every round may amount to many thousand rupees and it is hence essential that a person receiving such a sum during the early rounds (when the total contributions he has made are still few) establishes his credit-worthiness. To do this he has to produce a guarantor, to stand security for him.

The sequence of the recipients is determined either by lottery or by bidding. Either system is decided upon when the *dhigur* is inaugurated, but there are several variants to these systems. If the allotment of the annual capital sum is by lottery, a recipient who has no immediate use for the money may sell his turn to a participant who is in need of cash. At the beginning of the cycle, the amount to be paid for the chance of getting the capital sum may be considerable, but when the *dhigur* has only a few more years to run, a man may sell his turn for a small fee.

In *dhigur* following the system of bidding, the partners keenest to obtain the annual capital payment bid for it and the highest bidder pays to the treasurer the agreed sum. The amounts paid over the years by the successful bidders may add up to so large a sum that during the last one or two years the normal contributions need not be collected.

Every *dhigur* has a treasurer and the person to be chosen for this office must be trustworthy and in a sound financial position. On the day appointed for the pay-out of the capital sum, the partners gather in the treasurer's house and he spends a modest sum on entertaining them with tea and other refreshments. However, he is not out of pocket, for the recipient of the capital sum is expected to give him as a present an amount easily covering this expenditure. The treasurer may also lend money to contributors in arrear with their payments, and for such loans he is paid interest at current rates.

The share in a *dhigur* may be sold, and there were many cases of Thakalis selling such shares when they left Thaksatsae and moved permanently to Pokhara or other places outside Thak Khola. In the event of a shareholder dying his rights and obligations pass to his heir. A *dhigur* member who has fallen on bad times or an heir con-



sidered unreliable may not easily find a guarantor standing security for future payments and if such a person is to get the capital amount he may have to give up to 20 per cent of the capital sum to whoever ultimately agrees to stand security for his outstanding contributions.

Many Thakalis were members of several *dhigur*, and it was not unusual for a reasonably well-off man to pay annually between R2,000 and R4,000 in contributions to them. Such contributions range from R10 to R500 and the capital sums shared out vary in proportion.

In 1959 the thirteen headmen of Thaksatsae decided to forbid for a time the formation of new *dhigur* on the grounds that they had proliferated to such an extent that the network of resulting obligations and rights had brought an excessive complexity into the economy of the Thakalis.

Their formation is not confined to Thakalis. Some of the traders of Baragaon also formed them when they were in need of cash, but it would seem that this system of credit-raising is unknown, or at least not practised, in Dolpo and Tichurong. *Dhigur* similar to those of Thak Khola are prevalent, however, among the Gurungs and Bhotias of Manangbhot.\*

The way in which an individual trader can build up his business with the help of personal loans and the occasional participation in *dhigur* is illustrated by the case history of a relatively prosperous man of Baragaon, Tsiring Tensing, a resident of the village of Lubra. When Tsiring Tensing told me the story of the development of his trading contacts, he was forty-three years old and shared one wife with his two younger brothers; there were seven children of this polyandrous marriage and three illegitimate children of Tsiring Tensing lived in three other families of Lubra.

Tsiring Tensing's father, who was then no longer alive, had done only some petty trading. He owned two male *dzo* and sometimes used them to carry goods in the course of small transactions, but was not successful in his trading activities, and was burdened by debts of about R2,000 owed to two Thakalis of

\* Don Messerschmidt, 'Rotating Credit in Gurung Society: The *dhigur* Associations of Tin Gaun'. *The Himalayan Review* (Nepal Geographical Society), Volume V, 1972.

Tukche. This debt had been incurred by Tsiring Tensing's grandfather, and his father only just managed to pay the interest which was then 15 per cent per annum. The latter also owed R500 to a lama of Dzarkot and a lesser sum to a man of Tetang, both villages of Baragaon.

When Tsiring Tensing was about seventeen years old he began doing some small trade deals. He first borrowed R100 from a local lama, and later somewhat larger sums from two Thakalis of Tukche. With this money he bought salt in Mustang and carried it to Dana where he bartered it for grain. At first he carried the loads on his own back, and later he used *dzo* and goats. For many years he engaged only in the salt- and grain-trade, but when he was in his early thirties he started extending his trade deals to India. There he bought dyes, corals, tea, brass pots and pans, and iron cooking vessels. The latter he bought in Amritsar and when importing them into Nepal he had to pay customs' duty in Nautanwa. From the Indian frontier as far as Lubra he used porters for the transport of his goods, but on the stretch from Lubra to Tibet he used yak and *dzo* transport. By that time he acquired some yak.

At the beginning he supplied some goods to trading partners in Tibet on credit, but his father, who was then still alive, asked him not to leave large outstanding credit balances in Tibet. In pursuance of this advice he went to Tibet and collected 500 sheep and 21 yak from his debtors. But some animals died and several yak were killed by wolves after they had reached Lubra land. Consequently, he had a loss of R4,000-5,000.

To recover from this set-back he started a *dhigur* with some Thakalis of Jomosom. He was the first to get the capital sum of R3,000 and this he used to pay his debts. He also borrowed again from wealthy Thakalis and used the loans to trade in yak, sheep and wool. From that time onwards he had no more losses. On one occasion he and a Bonpo lama went to Delhi and ordered colour prints of a *thanka* for sale in Nepal and Tibet. This unusual venture proved profitable, for customers used to pay substantial sums for hand-painted *thanka* and were prepared to purchase the novel colour prints at a price greatly exceeding the printing costs.

With the money obtained he bought 260 young goats in Tibet

at a price of R10 each. Of these he sold 160 for R15 each and the remaining 100 he kept for one year. Then he sold 30 goats for R40 each and the remaining 70 goats for R52 each. Very little has to be spent on the maintenance of such animals for in Baragaon they find grazing even during the winter. Only on days of heavy snow must they be fed on buckwheat stalks.

At the time of my visit to Lubra, Tsiring Tensing had invested R10,000 in a deal involving the purchase of male *dzo* in Solu which has been described earlier (p. 196).

Tsiring Tensing had risen to relative wealth by his own efforts, but most of the deals he concluded were not out of the ordinary, and many men in Baragaon used to engage in trade of a similar nature. The changed conditions in Tibet have limited the scope of their business, however, and the short-term prospects for the traders of Baragaon and Thaksatsae are rather bleak. But as the Sherpas' trade with Tibet has to some extent been replaced by the income from tourism, There are also new opportunities for the people of the Kali Gandaki valley. It will probably be only a matter of time before the natural beauty and interest of that region too attracts sufficient numbers of tourists to compensate the local population for the loss of much of the traditional trade with Tibet.

### *Recent developments in Thak Khola*

The picture of the traditional economy of Thak Khola sketched in the preceding sections is based mainly on my observations in 1962. In the decade which has elapsed since then there have been changes no less profound than those which have transformed the economy of Khumbu. Though in 1962 Tukche was no longer the focal point of all the business activities of the great Thakali merchant families, it continued to be an important entrepôt for the trans-Himalayan trade, and caravans of yak, mules, and sheep and goats arriving with goods to be stored in its great houses were still a common sight. A process of disengagement, however, had already begun and most of the richest Thakalis had acquired houses and built up business enterprises in towns of the lower regions of Nepal, and came to Tukche only for short periods during the hot weather.

This drift away from Tukche was accelerated when the opening of a motorable road from Bhairawa to Pokhara brought cheap Indian salt right into the heart of the area which used to be served by the salt-traders of Thak Khola. While for a few years a preference for Tibetan salt, based on tradition and the belief in its beneficial influence on cattle, assured a limited demand even in Pokhara, the discrepancy in price was too great to allow this demand to persist. In 1972 Indian salt was sold in Pokhara for R2 per *pathi* while Tibetan salt cost R4.50 even in Tukche. By that time Indian salt had captured the market as far north as Tatopani and Dana, and this meant the virtual end of the salt-trade which had been the source of the prosperity of Tukche. Such Tibetan salt as still reaches Thak Khola is imported only for local consumption, and the grain/salt-trade is operated mainly by the people of Mustang and by Khamba refugees, who have settled in Baragaon and use Mustang men as their agents for all business deals inside Tibet. The quantities involved in this trade are small, however, and in Tukche only limited stocks of salt are kept. Cultivators from the middle-ranges, locally known as *dhakre*, carrying salt to Tukche and Jomosom mostly sell it for cash. They no longer want Tibetan salt, because in their own villages they can buy cheap Indian salt. The local people, however, still barter grain for salt which they need for their own use. Thus in 1972 1 *pathi* of rice was exchanged in Dana for 2 *pathi* of salt.

The trade in wool has also shrunk. The Chinese sell wool only in small quantities, and the big traders no longer find it profitable to engage in the wool-trade. Such wool as still comes from Tibet is used for spinning, weaving and carpet-making by the people of Thak Khola, and does not find its way to other parts of Nepal. Indeed the price of R5-6 per lb in Tukche is marginally higher than the price for similar wool in Kathmandu.

The decline of Tukche as a trading centre during the decade 1962-72 has led to the emigration of most of the wealthy merchant families. Some of the houses have fallen into decay, and others are being looked after by caretakers, many of whom are Bhotias of Baragaon. Even some low-caste blacksmiths and tailors have left Tukche because in the absence of their Thakali clients they could no longer make a living. In 1962 64 of the 92 houses then constituting Tukche were still inhabited by Thakalis, but by 1972 only

9 houses were occupied by their Thakali owners; and several of these were widows whose sons had already moved elsewhere. Of the Thakali householders 55 who had resided in Tukche in 1962 are now living in places outside Thak Khola. Of those families, 16 are residing in Kathmandu, 15 in Pokhara, and the rest in such towns as Bhairava and Nepalganj. The number of Thakalis including children in Kathmandu is close on 200, and my Thakali informants told me that in Pokhara there are at present about 100 Thakali families. Most of the Thakalis who moved to Kathmandu and other towns have established successful businesses, and some have entered government service. Many of the younger men have had a university education and the majority of the Thakalis living in Kathmandu are sending their children to such prestigious boarding schools as St. Xavier's, St. Joseph's and St. Mary's. A Thakali educated at Sandhurst is a captain in the Royal Guard, and a number of Thakalis have studied in such countries as Great Britain, Russia and Japan.

There is probably no other numerically small community in Nepal which has been so successful in turning a changed economic and social climate to its advantage, though clearly at the cost of abandoning their ancestral homeland.

Yet, by no means all Thakalis had to leave Thak Khola in order to maintain their standard of living. The inhabitants of the largely agricultural villages were less dependent on trade than the merchants of Tukche and they survived the dwindling of the salt-trade without having to adjust their entire economy. They too, however, took advantage of the growth of Pokhara as a marketing centre, as well as of the motor-road which now links Pokhara with Kathmandu. Vegetables and fruit are being grown throughout Thaksatsae and Panchgaon, and the caravans of mules and ponies which used to transport salt to the middle-ranges are now being used to supply Pokhara with potatoes, cabbages, carrots, cauliflowers and other vegetables grown by Thakalis.

Many Thakalis have also shown an interest in the development of tourism, for which Thak Khola offers hardly less scope than Solu and Khumbu. Already hundreds of tourists are trekking to Tukche and Jomosom and some of the Thakalis who have opened hotels and restaurants in Kathmandu are talking of investing in facilities for tourists in Thak Khola.

*Tichurong and the Tarali trading system*

The trade sphere of Thak Khola embraces the various ethnic groups dwelling along the banks of the upper Kali Gandaki and its tributaries and extends in some respects also into the highlands of Dolpo. But the inhabitants of that bleak and lonely region, separated from Thak Khola by passes as formidable as any permitting a minor flow of trade, are only partly involved in the trading system based on the Kali Gandaki route. They have other outlets for their products and alternative sources of supplies of grain. With the intention to trace these trade links I undertook in 1966 a tour along the southern fringes of Dolpo and this led me through the Bheri valley to Tibrikot and Tarakot. There I met some of the men of Do and Mukot, whom I had encountered in 1962, and thus I gained an impression of developments in the intervening years. Trade with Tibet, which in 1962 had come to an almost complete stop, had revived sufficiently to permit the resumption of the far-flung barter system by which Tibetan salt reaches the middle-ranges of Nepal. In 1972 I had the good fortune of meeting one of my chief informants from Tarakot, and, by spending some days with him, brought my knowledge of the area up to date.

The region south of Eastern Dolpo, drained by the Bheri river, is known to the Bhotias as Tichurong and to the local inhabitants as Ba. The main centre of population in that part of the Bheri valley is Tarakot, while further downstream there is the important village of Tibrikot. Tarakot is a conglomeration of four major settlements known as Gompa, Taranga, Dzong and Turpa, and the smaller settlements of Kola and Tachin. All these settlements cling to slopes above the left bank of the Bheri river. The inhabitants of Gompa, so called after the Buddhist temple it contains, speak a Tibetan dialect related to the language of Dolpo, whereas the people of the other settlements speak a distinct language which is not understood by any of their neighbours. The speakers of this language refer to themselves as Kaike but are more widely known as Taralis. When asked about their affiliations to other groups they claim to be Magars, but this claim seems to have as little justification as the pretence of the Baragaonlis of Thak Khola to be Gurungs. At first sight the Taralis appear to occupy a position com-

parable to that of the Thakalis, who also stand midway between the Bhotias to the north and their non-Buddhist tribal neighbours to the south. David Snellgrove considers the inhabitants of the Tarakot cluster as 'tibetanized Magars',\* but I believe that this description is erroneous, for if the Taralis were Magars they would surely have retained some traces of the Magar clan system, and would speak either Magar or the Tibetan dialect of their northern neighbours rather than a separate language, equally unintelligible to Magars and the Bhotias of Dolpo.

Apart from the villages on the left bank of the Bheri there are three settlements situated on the hill-sides high above the right bank of the river. They are known as Khani, Lawan and Bhantara, and belong in some respects to the same social group as the settlements of Tarakot. Their language is a Tibetan dialect similar to that of Gompa, and some families intermarry with the inhabitants of the villages on the left bank. The trading pattern too hardly differs from that of such villages as Tarang and Dzong. Not far from Lawan and Khani there is one village, however, in which the influence of the Bhotias of Dolpo predominates. It is called Parlā and is noted for a fine Bonpo *gompa*.

The ethnic composition of Tibrikot is entirely different. It is an outpost of Nepalese Hindu society and was the seat of a Thakuri raja of Kalial clan. The population consists of Brahmans, Thakuris, Chetris and untouchable castes.

While Tarakot is the outlet for the southern trade of the Bhotias of such Eastern Dolpo villages as Tsharka, Do, Pungar, Mukot, Gerang and Kakot, the Bhotias of the Namgung and Phoksumdo areas of Western Dolpo depend for their supplies of food grains on the trade passing through Tibrikot.

The relationship between the Bhotias of Dolpo and the people of Tarakot is of a kind not paralleled elsewhere in the contact zones between high-altitude dwellers and the inhabitants of lower regions. Apart from the exchange of salt obtained from Tibet by the Dolpo people for grain brought by men of Tarakot from the middle-ranges – a trade comparable to that between Dolpo and Thak Khola – there is an intimate symbiosis between the two populations. This symbiosis between Bhotias and Taralis involves the alternative use of settlements and houses as well as a mutually

\* *Himalayan Pilgrimage*, Oxford 1961, p. 36.

beneficial rendering of services. At the beginning of winter, usually in November, large numbers of Dolpo people move down to Tarakot and stay there until early May in the houses of Tarali partners, most of whom vacate their houses and migrate across the Tanke Lekh, a range with passes of over 14,000 feet, to the Baglung, Palpa and Gulmi regions and sometimes even to the Terai and such Indian towns as Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kanpur. During their absence Dolpo families, with many of whom they have traditional links, guard their houses, look after their cattle, do household chores for old people left behind in Tarakot, and perform some agricultural tasks. The relationship between Taralis and Bhotias is that of partners of similar status, even though in some cases Dolpo men and women are employed in Tarali houses in the rôle of servants. The element of mutual dependence is foremost in this relationship. The traders of Tarakot could hardly leave their houses, old people and children, and cattle, and spend six months travelling and trading in the middle-ranges if the Bhotias of Dolpo were not there to do the heavy work, such as the removal of snow from the flat roofs, the repair of terraced fields, the transport of stones for house-building and the tending of cattle. Ploughing and the carrying of manure to the fields are also tasks often done by Bhotias. The Dolpo people too find it convenient to leave during the winter only a few men and women in their villages to look after their domestic animals and old people unable to make the journey to lower regions. In Tarakot and other villages of Tichurong they find food and shelter and a climate much more pleasant than that of their snowbound and wind-swept highland, where fuel is scarce and the grain reaped or bartered for salt does not suffice to feed the entire population throughout the year. Some of the Dolpo people go year after year to the same house in Tarakot, but others change their host families. On days on which they work for Taralis, they get three meals a day, and a wage paid usually in grain. The daily wage for men is about 6 lbs of barley or buckwheat, and women get the same for heavy work such as the carrying of manure, and 3 lbs of grain for spinning or weaving. A woman can weave 4-5 coloured woollen blankets a month, and at a selling price of Rs80-150 per blanket the Tarali who provides the wool and the worker's food plus a daily wage, still derives a reasonable profit from this arrangement.



In the month of May, when I visited Tichurong, some Bhotias of Dolpo were still in Tarakot and most Taralis had returned from their journeys. Thus the two groups overlapped and mingled in the houses and streets of Tarakot. It looked as if the actors of two different plays set in different periods of history had got mixed up on one stage. The Tarali villagers, dressed in Nepali clothes, appeared rather drab and lacking in colour except for an occasional woollen Dolpo blanket worn as a wrap for warmth. In the village they usually went barefoot and their close-fitting trousers accentuated their slight appearance.

The many Bhotias, partly Dolpo people and partly Tibetan refugees, then living in Nepal, presented a complete contrast. In their ample woollen clothes, hitched up and drawn in at the waist, so as to fall skirt-like close to the knees, they appeared as sturdy and substantial figures. Their stout, coloured boots added a little to their height and made them seem more solid than the thin-legged, barefoot Taralis. Their hair, too, worn long and often wound in plaits round the head, and in the case of Dolpo lamas forming a crown-like wheel, enhanced their stature. In their impressive, colourful outfit, often completed by a silver-handled dagger conspicuously worn in their belt, they reminded one of medieval soldiers moving among the paler figures of a more prosaic age. Though they were visitors, trade partners or even paid dependants, they retained a certain swagger which gave credence to the story that until some ten or twelve years before, the people of Tichurong allowed themselves to be politically dominated by Bhotias of Dolpo.

This information was given to me by Taralis, who said that traditionally, land disputes and family quarrels were referred to 'big men' of Dolpo for arbitration. These men were not necessarily very rich but were respected for their judgement. One of them had been Nyi-ma Tshering of Saldang, then no longer alive, but vividly described by David Snellgrove\* who had met him in 1956. My Tarali informants explained this situation by saying that in the old days the people of Tarakot were foolish and often quarrelled with each other. They had no headman to settle their disputes and when men from Dolpo came to trade the Taralis complained to them against each other, asking them to act as arbitrators. 'Although

\* cf. *Himalayan Pilgrimage*, Oxford 1961, pp. 79-83.

Tarakot was in Nepal, it was in a remote corner and until recently not well-administered. We were dependent on trade with the Bhotias and had to work closely with them. Therefore we took our quarrels to them and accepted the arbitrator's decision as final.' The people of Tarakot also remembered that the 'big men' of Dolpo were so powerful that they would send their messengers to summon Taralis against whom there were complaints and then sat in judgement over them. Bhotias exercising such influence were then found in Tsharka, Do, Saldang and some other villages. Strangely enough some Magars of Maikot, a large village some three days' journey south of Tarakot, played a similar rôle in the settlement of disputes of Taralis. Thus a certain Hasta Bir Pun, *taluqdar* of Maikot, used to hear cases and send notices to people of Tarakot, requiring them to attend his court.

This dependence of the Taralis on arbitrators from other communities is all the more incongruous as they are in an economically strong position as a link between the pastoral people of the Dolpo highlands and the grain producing population of the middle-ranges of Nepal. The pattern of trade seems to have slightly shifted in recent years but basically the position of the people of Tichurong has always been similar to that of the Thakalis of Thak Khola. One of the more recent changes relates to the venue for the barter deals between Dolpo people and Taralis. In earlier days greater numbers of Taralis went to Dolpo villages to exchange grain for salt but in 1966 it was mainly Bhotias of Dolpo who undertook the journey to Tarakot to sell such salt as they succeeded in obtaining from Tibet.

As in other border regions of Nepal, there used to be customs posts in Tichurong, but no detailed information on their operation was obtainable locally. Until about 1936 there was a customs house at Yalakot, a place on the bank of the Bheri just below the settlement of Gompa. The toll imposed on all loads passing through amounted to 6 *paisa*\* (equivalent to about 1 lb of barley flour) for a man's load and 2 *paisa* for pack sheep or goats. Later the customs house was shifted further downstream to Dunay, and there it remained until about 1956. The rates remained the same and the toll was levied either on the down journey or the up-journey of a caravan but not on both journeys. It is possible that the collection

\* There are 100 *paisa* to the rupee.

of this toll at Yalakot was farmed out as in the case of the customs fee on the Kali Gandaki route but local people remember that the customs office at Dunay was not run by a contractor but was under the control of the government officials at Jumla. Caravans going south from Tarakot across the Tankhe Lekh had to pay a toll in Yamakhar. It was collected by Magars of Maikot, who presumably had taken the customs contract, and the fee for one sheep or goat rose ultimately from 1 to 12½ *paisa*, and the fee for a man's load rose from 4 to 50 *paisa*. Representations of the people of Tichurong to the government led to the ultimate abolishment of this tax.

According to information obtained in Tarakot there used to be a rule that Taralis were not allowed to go further north than Do, Mukot and Tsharka, and that they were not to trade directly with Tibetans. Conversely, Bhotias of Dolpo were not permitted to go further south than Tichurong. It is not clear on whose authority these rules were established. They are comparable to the rules forbidding Solu Sherpas to trade directly with Tibet, and they may have been framed by Nepalese officials even though in Dolpo only the local headmen could have enforced them. I was told that all such restrictions on trade were relaxed about 1960. Taralis have still no occasion to go further north than previously but some Bhotias of Mukot, and certain villages in the Barbung valley, have started to travel south across the Tankhe Lekh. They do that journey carrying goods on their backs or using sheep and goats as pack animals. Yak are taken only as far as Tarakot, for the country south of the Tankhe Lekh is too low for yak. It was largely this fact which made Tarakot into an obvious entrepôt, where, as in Tukche, goods would be transferred from one type of transport to the other and two different sets of traders would meet and barter commodities brought from opposite directions.

Tarakot is much closer to the villages of Eastern Dolpo than Tukche, but the latter has the advantage of lying within relatively easy reach of densely populated areas of the middle-ranges, whereas passes of over 14,000 feet separate Tarakot from comparable country to the south. While a caravan setting out from Tsharka takes eight days to reach Tukche, it can get to Tarakot in four days, and for other Dolpo villages the relative ease of getting to Tarakot is an even greater incentive to favour this outlet for their trade. Barter deals involving an exchange of salt against grain are not

always completed immediately. Sometimes the one commodity is given on credit and the other delivered afterwards, but the rate is invariably fixed at the time when the parties enter into the agreement.

The main basis of the trade between Dolpo and Tichurong was the Tibetan salt to which only the Bhotias of Dolpo had access and which the people of Tichurong needed both for their own consumption and for resale to the populations of the middle-ranges. Their ability to supply salt enabled the Dolpo people not only to cover their deficit of locally grown crops such as barley, but to acquire even such superior types of food-grain as rice and wheat. The temporary shortage of salt supplies between 1959 and 1963 impoverished the people of Dolpo who had to sell cattle in order to be able to buy even less desirable grain such as buckwheat and millet. However, there was also a long-term shift in trading patterns. Up to the 1920s and 1930s when very little cash was in circulation, the people of Tichurong bought from Dolpo mainly salt, carpets and blankets, while, later, trade in livestock, and particularly in sheep and ponies, gained in importance.

Not all Taralis engage in the same type of trade but unlike the Thakalis of Tukche they cannot operate an entrepôt trade such as enables merchants to stay for long periods in their own houses, and to wait there for customers from north and south to bring their goods and barter them for commodities kept in the merchants' store-rooms. The Taralis have to be mobile if they are to exploit their position at a meeting point between two ecological spheres.

The rhythm of trade depends largely on the commodities handled. Three main types of commerce can be distinguished: trade in textiles, trade in livestock, and trade in salt and grain. These three types are not mutually exclusive, and a trader may alternately and sometimes even simultaneously engage in two or more types of business. However, most men speculate to a limited extent, and some Taralis never engage in more than one type of trade.

Men who concentrate mainly on the sale of textiles to villagers in the middle-ranges begin the preparations for their annual trading journey in the previous summer. They collect woollen blankets, cummerbunds (*patuka*) of coloured wool, knitted pullovers and knotted scarfs. Many of these items are being produced in Tarakot,

either by Tarali women or by Bhotia women who spend the winter there and spin and weave for wages. But the quantity of textiles made in Tarakot is not sufficient to meet the demand, and hence Tarali traders undertake journeys to the Bhotia villages of Dolpo and purchase there additional supplies of woollen goods. These journeys are usually brief, being fitted in between the ploughing of their fields and the eventual sowing. They pay for their purchases either in cash or more frequently in commodities from the lowlands which they had brought to Tarakot the previous winter. Their preparations for the season's trading may also include a short visit to some of the Magar villages beyond the Tankhe Lekh, such as Maikot and Ramkot. There they buy rough woollen mats and blankets as well as occasionally some sheep and goats. They deposit such purchases with a friend before hurrying back to Tarakot. The system of ceremonial friendships concluded with some formalities including a feast, provides such traders with reliable facilities for short-term storage. Taralis have ceremonial friends in most of the areas regularly visited on their trading ventures.

After such brief visits to the one or other Magar village, Taralis return to their village for the main harvest which is gathered in October. When the harvest has been brought in most men and women are ready to set out on their main trading trip. This is the time when parties are being made up. Taralis seldom travel alone, but the members of two or three households form one party and stay together for the whole winter. Some people link up year after year, but no partnership is inherently permanent, and there are men who change partners every year.

On the journey across the Jangla pass as far as Dhorpatan, all the traders travel together, and it is only there that they split up, and individual family groups set out for the regions of their choice. These groups consist of both men and women, and nowadays some Taralis take children above the age of ten or twelve with them, and let them go to school wherever they spend any lengthy period. When after a month or so they move on to another area the children may go with them and gain admission to another school. Nepali schoolmasters tolerate such a mobility of their pupils but occasionally Tarali parents may find a friend willing to give a home to the children and enable them to stay in one place for the whole winter.

Such a person need not be a ceremonial friend (*mit*), but may be a close acquaintance without ritual obligation.

The trading areas regularly visited by Taralis include the valley of the upper Bari Gad, locally known as Bhujī Khola, Gulmi and Tansing, Baglung, Adi Khola, and Pokhara. When Tarali traders arrive in such an area, they call first on their ceremonial friends and then hire a house for about fifteen to twenty days. There they store the bulk of their trade goods, and leaving their wives in the house, they set out with a small selection of commodities and go from house to house within a radius of a few hours' walk. In this first round they try to sell their wares for cash, but often they have to sell on credit, allowing the purchaser one to three months to pay. In these transactions there is no element of barter, and the Taralis depend on the cash received for making purchases of necessities to be taken to Tarakot in the following spring. The selling of their textiles takes a long time, and after exhausting one area, they move on to a different locality again renting a house, and then making a round of all the houses in the vicinity.

Nowadays Tarali traders also use cash to buy food for their immediate consumption, but traditionally they relied mainly on the casual hospitality dispensed to anyone coming on legitimate business to the house of a Nepali farmer.

The value and composition of a Tarali trader's goods carried on the annual journey to the middle-ranges vary, but the following list represents an average collection such as used to be carried by a single family with the help of one or two Bhotias engaged as porters:

	<i>Average price (each)</i>
80 woollen blankets	R50
15 sweaters	R15
30 cummerbunds	R50
15 scarfs	R14
10 coarse mats	R45

The prices are those current in Tarakot, and profits depend on the state of the market. The value of multi-coloured woollen blankets has dropped because of the competition from cheaper though inferior machine-made blankets imported from India. For this reason Tarali traders carry nowadays fewer of these blankets and in 1972 forty blankets was the average number to be handled by one man.

When a trader has disposed of all his goods, his labours are by no means completed. As many items are sold on credit, he has to make another round to collect the amounts due to him. This is a difficult task requiring both diplomacy and perseverance. Some customers try various tricks to elude their creditor. When they hear of his approach they go into hiding, and their wives claim ignorance of their whereabouts. Others admit the debt, but plead for additional time to collect the sum they owe. Hence traders have often to make a third round of their customers, and it happens not infrequently that part of a debt has to be held over until the following year. While a trader's ceremonial friend may sometimes help in the distribution of goods, the collection of the payment is a task never passed on to him.

I have heard Taralis say that in the past customers were more honest and that it was rare for a debtor not to pay his debt at the agreed time.

When a Tarali has collected all his money he travels to one of the larger towns in the Terai and there purchases his personal requirements for the year, namely cotton cloth, shoes, tea, oil, soap, cigarettes and various household goods such as metal vessels. At the same time he buys goods for eventual resale to Dolpo. Some rich traders even travel by train to Kalimpong in order to purchase goods of the type required by the Bhotias of Dolpo, such as Tibetan boots and coats (*bakhu*). On such goods they have to pay custom's duty when re-entering Nepal.

When the traders are ready to return to Tarakot they gather in places such as Tansing and then travel along the same route. As far as Dhorpatan their journey is easy, but from then on they face many hazards. In March/April the passes leading across the Tankeh Lekh are often still snow-covered, and many are the Taralis who have died in snow-storms. On the stretch from Maikot to Tarakot the heavily laden travellers have to spend three nights in the open or shelter in caves, and parties are often snowed in there. In such an event the strongest young men return to Maikot for relief supplies.

After the hardships of the journey and the long absence their home-coming is an occasion for celebrations lasting several days. The choicest food and large quantities of beer and spirits are prepared, and kinsmen and friends gather to welcome the returning

men and women. But the period of rest and conviviality does not last more than about a week, for there are agricultural tasks to be done, and the commodities brought for sale have to be sold. Soon the traders set out on short trips to the Bhotia settlements of Dolpo and to the villages of Hindus in the region of Tibrikot known as Khasan, i.e. the place of the 'Khas' (Nepali-speaking Brahmans, Thakuris and Chetris). To the former they take tea, Tibetan boots and coats, leather belts with pockets and similar goods, and there they sell partly on credit and partly for cash. To Khasan they take cloth, cigarettes, sugar and a few other commodities, and again often give the goods on credit. The Taralis say that a few of the Hindus of Khasan are nowadays doing a little trade themselves, but that they are inexperienced and lack the efficiency of professional traders. They go to the Terai, earn wages by working as porters, and with the money thus gained buy a few goods which they bring to Tibrikot.

Distinct from the trade in textiles is the buying and selling of sheep and goats, even though some Tarali traders sometimes combine the two and take a few sheep to the areas where they are used to sell their textiles. In the past, when there was unrestricted traffic across the Tibetan border, sheep and goats were available in large numbers in the Bhotia villages of Dolpo. Rich Taralis were then in the habit of purchasing as many as 200 sheep and goats, paying partly in cash and partly in grain. They bought the animals in October and November, and drove them after a brief halt in Tarakot across the Jangla pass to Dhorpatan. The sheep and goats carried no loads except for a small quantity of food for the traders' use on the journey. Progress was slow, for grazing sheep and goats cover only three to four miles per day. The sheep were sold in the middle-ranges in such places as Baglung, Pokhara and Gulmi and profit margins were larger than in the trade with textiles.

But nowadays the supply of sheep in Dolpo has diminished, and Taralis go as far afield as the villages east of Jumla, Mugu and even Thak Khola in search of sheep. They try, moreover, to make two or even three trips, one in September, and one or two more in October and November. The selling of sheep is less difficult than that of textiles, for many of the transactions are in cash, and there is no need for several rounds of debt collections. Outstanding debts are usually held over until the next trip.



With the money received from the sale of sheep the Tarali traders go to the Terai or Calcutta, and purchase goods similar to those bought by other Tarali traders. Their return journey to Tarakot also follows the pattern described above. Though some men specialize in the buying and selling of livestock, others alternate between this form of trading and the hawking of textile goods, or on occasion even combine both to a limited extent.

In quite a different class, and presumably of much greater antiquity, is the barter trade in salt and grain. Though for generations of vital importance to all of the border people it is now threatened by the easy availability of Indian salt throughout the lower regions of Nepal. In a few years' time the salt-traders will almost certainly lose their traditional markets, but today the exchange of grain for salt can still be observed as a functioning system.

Possession of a flock of goats and sheep accustomed to carrying loads is an indispensable condition for the operation of this barter-trade. The pack-animals are home-bred or obtained from Magars of the Maikot area, and are different from the Tibetan sheep and goats. Only castrated males are used for carrying loads. In the months of June to August the owners of such flocks move to the Bhotia villages of Dolpo. Each animal carries two small bags containing rice, barley, buckwheat, millet, maize or maize-flour, and this grain is exchanged for Tibetan salt. As at this time of the year there is good grazing on the lush pastures of Dolpo, some female sheep and goats are sometimes taken along with the pack-animals. On their return to Tarakot the traders store the salt in large wooden boxes.

In addition to the salt bought in such villages as Do, Saldang, Namdo and Shimen the Tarali traders also buy salt which Bhotias bring on the backs of yak, sheep and goats to Tarakot, and barter these for grain. The quantity of the salt brought to Tarakot is limited, however, and it is for this reason that Taralis go with their caravans to the highlands of Dolpo.

Until about 1958 when the supply of Tibetan salt was plentiful Magars and other villagers from the middle-ranges used to come to Tarakot to buy salt for cash or in exchange for grain, and at that time Tarakot served as an entrepôt somewhat similar to Tukche. Nowadays, however, people from the middle-ranges have ceased to

come to Tarakot, for they can buy Indian salt at lower cost in the market towns of Nepal.

Tarali traders can meet that challenge only by taking their salt to their customers' door. In September they repair the bags, shear their sheep and finally pack the salt in loads of 30 lbs. Before setting out on their journey they consult omens and feast for several days. In late October or early November the caravans begin their annual migration. Two or three traders may join together and move with 300-400 pack-animals. On an average two shepherds in addition to the owner are required for 100 sheep, and each flock is accompanied by one or two Tibetan sheep dogs. Some of the salt-traders take the route across the Jangla pass which is used also by other traders of Tarakot, but the majority prefer the easier route via Khasan to Rukumkot, Musikot and Jajarkot. In those areas they exchange salt for grain. This is a long-drawn-out and laborious process. While the traders prefer payment in rice or in cash, they have often to accept barley, wheat or maize.

In the rice-producing areas they camp on the harvested fields and stay with their flocks in the open. The manure the animals leave behind is adequate compensation for the grazing they find. Whatever grain is obtained in exchange for the salt is deposited in the house of a friend. Three to four months may pass before the Tarali traders have disposed of all their salt.

On their return journey they pass either through Khasan or across the Tankeh Lekh. As in the middle-ranges salt is still cheaper than grain, a trader may have more loads to bring back than he has pack-animals. In such a case he operates a shuttle service, going one stage with half the loads, and returning for the remainder. All traders travelling with sheep reach Tarakot in May or June, sometimes after an absence of up to eight months. Their life is harder and more hazardous than that of other traders. Most of the time they sleep in the open. They carry no tents and protect only the bags of grain or salt with waterproof sheets. Wolves sometimes attack their sheep and have to be driven off.

After their return to Tarakot they stay for about two weeks at home, and then set off again to Khasan or Maikot to purchase barley to be used for barter in the Bhotia villages of Dolpo. Of the rice they brought from the lower regions only a small part is available for such barter. Most of it is required for consumption in their

own village. Unlike the Bhotias the Taralis maintain a relatively high dietary standard and the local demand for rice is given priority over sales to Bhotias.

Apart from the trade in textiles and livestock, and the barter of salt for grain, there is also trade in horses. Some Taralis breed horses and others purchase horses from the Bhotias of Dolpo. They visit villages such as Tsharka, Do and Namgung and there buy horses, paying either in cash or half in cash and half in commodities. It seems that horses are never the objects of straight barter deals. In the markets of Gulmi, Piuthan and Dang horses fetch between R600 and 1,500. They are sometimes sold on credit and only wealthy men have sufficient capital to engage in horse-trading. Horses can cross the Tankeh Lekh, and those taking horses to the middle-ranges travel usually with parties of dealers in textiles, who maintain a good speed while men travelling with sheep are very much slower.

The various types of trading operations traditionally undertaken by Taralis are illustrated by the concrete examples of some groups of traders I encountered in May 1966 while on my way from Tarakot to Dhorpatan.

One group consisted of nine men who in November 1965 had driven a flock of 400 castrated goats and sheep across the Tankhe Lekh, the journey taking them two months. The animals belonged partly to the nine men, and partly to other villagers. Each animal was carrying a load of about 30 lbs. The herdsmen had stayed with their flocks about three months in the Musikot area, grazing their flocks on the land of friendly villagers. During this time they bartered salt at an equal rate for rice, sold some for cash and bought some maize. The return journey took them again two months, for progress of such caravans is slow, and a stage which a laden porter can complete in one day takes a flock five days. For the transport of goods is combined with the grazing of the animals, and a more hurried progress would interfere with the proper use of pastures along the route.

Another group of traders was led by one of the richest men in Tarakot, Rajiman Rokaya by name. He was travelling with one companion and eight porters carrying trade goods. In the late autumn he had travelled from Tarakot all the way to Pokhara

taking with him fifteen horses. Of these he sold fourteen at prices ranging from R500 to 1,500, and he brought back one. Taking the cash received for the horses with him, he travelled to Kalimpong, where he stayed for about a week. There he bought balls of Tibetan tea, woollen Tibetan-style men's coats (*bakhu*), other woollen clothes, Tibetan boots and velvet. All these goods he took by rail to Butwal, and then on the backs of porters to Tarakot. The portorage for 100 lbs from Butwal costs about R120. In addition to the goods bought in Kalimpong he had also bought cigarettes, matches, sugar and toffee, and these goods too were carried by the eight porters. Considering the cost of transport and the hardship of the journey, involving the crossing of the Tankhe Lekh in November and again in May, his profit margin seemed modest. Thus a ball of Tibetan tea brought for the equivalent of Nepali R3 in Kalimpong could be sold for R5 in Dolpo, and a woollen coat costing R25 in Kalimpong would sell in Tarakot or Dolpo for R42.

At that time of the year many of the Taralis who had gone south at the beginning of the winter were returning to Tarakot. Among those I met were two men who had gone to Pokhara carrying with them eighteen woollen blankets some bought in Dolpo and some woven in their own houses by hired Bhotia women. These they sold in Pokhara for an average price of R50. With some of the money received they bought in Yamakhar two plough bullocks costing R300 and R260 respectively.

During the many months spent by Taralis away from home, they not only sell goods brought from Tarakot, but also engage in minor trade deals or accept casual work if the opportunity offers. Unlike the Thakalis of Thak Khola, they do not keep tea stalls or liquor shops and I have found no evidence of Taralis establishing themselves as businessmen in the towns of the middle-ranges in the way many enterprising Thakalis have done.

A comparison between the trading pattern of the Taralis of Tichurong with that of the Thakalis of Thak Khola reveals fundamental differences notwithstanding the fact that both act as middlemen in the economic exchanges between the Bhotia populations of the border lands and the inhabitants of Nepal's middle-ranges. The differences are partly due to the nature of the trade-routes

which they control. The route along the Kali Gandaki river leads from the Tibetan frontier entirely through inhabited country and is unimpeded by any high ranges similar to those which separate Tichurong from the Magar country to the south. The obvious advantages of the Kali Gandaki route enabled the Thakalis to develop strong commercial links stretching from India to Tibetan towns, whereas the Taralis could operate only within the much more restricted framework of a trade largely determined by the produce and the needs of an area as economically backward as Dolpo.

In a community of traders one might expect to find a developed system of financing trading operations such as the *dhigur* system of the Thakalis. Yet the Taralis have no *dhigur* or other credit association, and there is very little lending and borrowing of money. In the rare case of a cash loan being given the debtor may have to pledge some of his land.

Despite differences in wealth there is an almost fanatical sense of equality. Taralis insist that within their community all are equal, and that 'the rich do not dominate the poor'. This attitude is reflected in the reluctance of Taralis to accept paid work in the service of other Taralis. To work for wages is considered demeaning, but many services are rendered on an exchange basis. Thus a man who has no plough bullocks may hire a bullock from a neighbour, and pay the hire by working in his fields. Similarly those short of manure hire cows and sheep to be penned in on their fields, and repay the hire by working for the owner of the animals. The exchange of labour among villagers of equal status is called *labe*, and this extends also to reciprocal help between inhabitants of different villages. Thus kinsmen in another village who have already completed their own harvest may come and assist with the reaping in a village where the harvest has been delayed.

Over and above such reciprocal help, there is among Taralis a tradition of great generosity towards co-villagers who have suffered misfortune. If a family is in need other villagers and even people from neighbouring villages will help with substantial gifts of grain and other foodstuffs, and even household and agricultural implements without any thought of return. Thus a man losing his house and stores in a fire will be set up by his kinsmen and neighbours, and a trader robbed of his goods by brigands will be helped

by other traders. Taralis emphasize that whereas there is intense rivalry and jealousy by those of equal status, towards the victims of misfortune much constructive sympathy is shown.

The cooperation between Taralis is clearly distinguished from their relationship with Bhotias, which involves the payment of wages in cash or grain, and also from the permanent relationship between a Tarali family and a family of Kami, low-status blacksmiths living in a separate settlement of the Tarakot cluster. The latter link resembles in some but not all respects the hereditary relationship between high-caste Hindu landowners and untouchable artisans prevalent throughout Nepal. The Tarali patron, referred to as *bista*, has a prior claim on the labour of his Kami dependants, but pays them in grain according to a scale similar to that applied to Bhotia daily labourers working for Taralis. Even for their iron-working the Kami blacksmiths are paid by piece-work. However, at harvest the patron gives his Kamis a gift of grain, and at festivals he gives them food and beer, and sometimes an additional present.

The different nature of the relationship between Taralis and Bhotias is reflected in the use of a reciprocal term, which indicates equality. The partners are called *naichan*, and they have priority in trading deals. The Taralis maintain that their Bhotia partners benefit more from the relationship than they themselves, because Bhotias often come with their whole family expecting to be fed by their Tarali partners, whereas Taralis usually go alone to Dolpo and then only for a few days. To make up for this difference, their *naichan* entertain them with the very best food they can lay their hands on.

The Taralis' insistence on the basic equality of all members of their community is somewhat inconsistent with the existence of three marriage classes of differential status. These three classes are not named, but everyone knows to which group a family belongs and normally there is no intermarriage between the classes. In the village of Tarang for instance, there are 30 houses belonging to class A, 16 houses belonging to class B, and 7 houses belonging to class C. The three classes inter-dine, but members of different classes do not drink from the same cup. Within each class there are several exogamous clans, and ideally marriages should be within the same class. In the event of an inter-class union the children are

incorporated into the class of the spouse of lower status irrespective of his or her sex.

There is no apparent correlation between marriage classes, language groups and residential units. Members of all the three classes are found in most of the villages of Tichurong and those of the same class intermarry irrespective of linguistic differences and spatial distance. Indeed the marriage classes are in the nature of status categories rather than of descent groups, even though the distinctions in rank are attributed to differences of origin. This system of ranked classes distinguishes the Taralis from their Magar neighbours and recalls the hierarchic order which one encounters among the Bhotias of Baragaon (p. 151) and some villages of Humla (p. 270).

A widely known myth supports the tradition that originally only people of the highest class (A) dwelt in Tichurong, and that the members of class B are descended from later immigrants who married girls of class A. Class C is supposed to comprise the descendants of Bhotias from Dolpo who married Tarali women and settled in Tichurong. Although these Bhotias had no clan-names of their own, they imitated the local population and called themselves by such clan-names as Rokaya and Bura.

While Tichurong is the main southern outlet for the trade of Eastern Dolpo, and the Taralis are the principal intermediaries between Bhotias and the people of the middle-ranges, the Bhotias of Western Dolpo, comprising the two areas known as Namgung and Phoksumdo, receive the bulk of their grain supplies via Tibrikot and the surrounding area inhabited by various Hindu castes.

However, there is relatively little direct contact between the Brahmans, Thakuris and Chetris of Tibrikot, and the Bhotias of the remoter Dolpo villages, though members of both ethnic groups occasionally meet midway in the settlements of Murwa and Ringmo.

In 1966 1 measure of salt was bartered in Murwa for 2 of maize or buckwheat flour, or  $1\frac{1}{2}$  of *ua*-barley, or 1 of rice. The rates at Ringmo, a village close to Murwa, were almost identical, but at Tibrikot different rates prevailed. There, 1 measure of salt was bartered for 3 of maize flour, and 2 of salt were paid for 3 of

husked rice. In the old days, traders of Tibrikot used to take salt to Jagarkot and sell it for five times the volume of rice or fifteen times the volume of wheat. But the rate at Jagarkot has radically changed, and in 1966 1 measure of salt was worth only an equal quantity of rice. This change is due to the improvement of communications in the Terai and lower ranges and the resultant availability of cheap Indian salt in regions where previously only Tibetan salt was used. During the shortage of Tibetan salt in the years 1959-63, the flow of salt was reversed and people from Western Dolpo came to Tibrikot to buy Indian salt. Traders of Sallyana purchased such salt in Nepalganj close to the railhead at the Indian frontier, transported it to Jagarkot, from where enterprising local traders brought it to Tibrikot and exchanged it for carpets and woollen blankets. At that time Tibetan salt was bartered in Tibrikot at the exorbitant exchange rate of 1 measure of salt for 12 measures of maize. When reasonable quantities of Tibetan salt became once more available, the old trading pattern was at least partly restored, and in 1966 caravans of sheep and goats from Phoksumdo could be seen near Tibrikot carrying bags of Tibetan salt to villages in the Bheri valley, only some fifteen miles north of Jagarkot. Even though the price of the salt had been depressed by the competition with Indian salt, the Bhotias of the Phoksumdo area had no choice but to resume their traditional exchange of salt for food-grains which they needed and could not obtain by any other means.

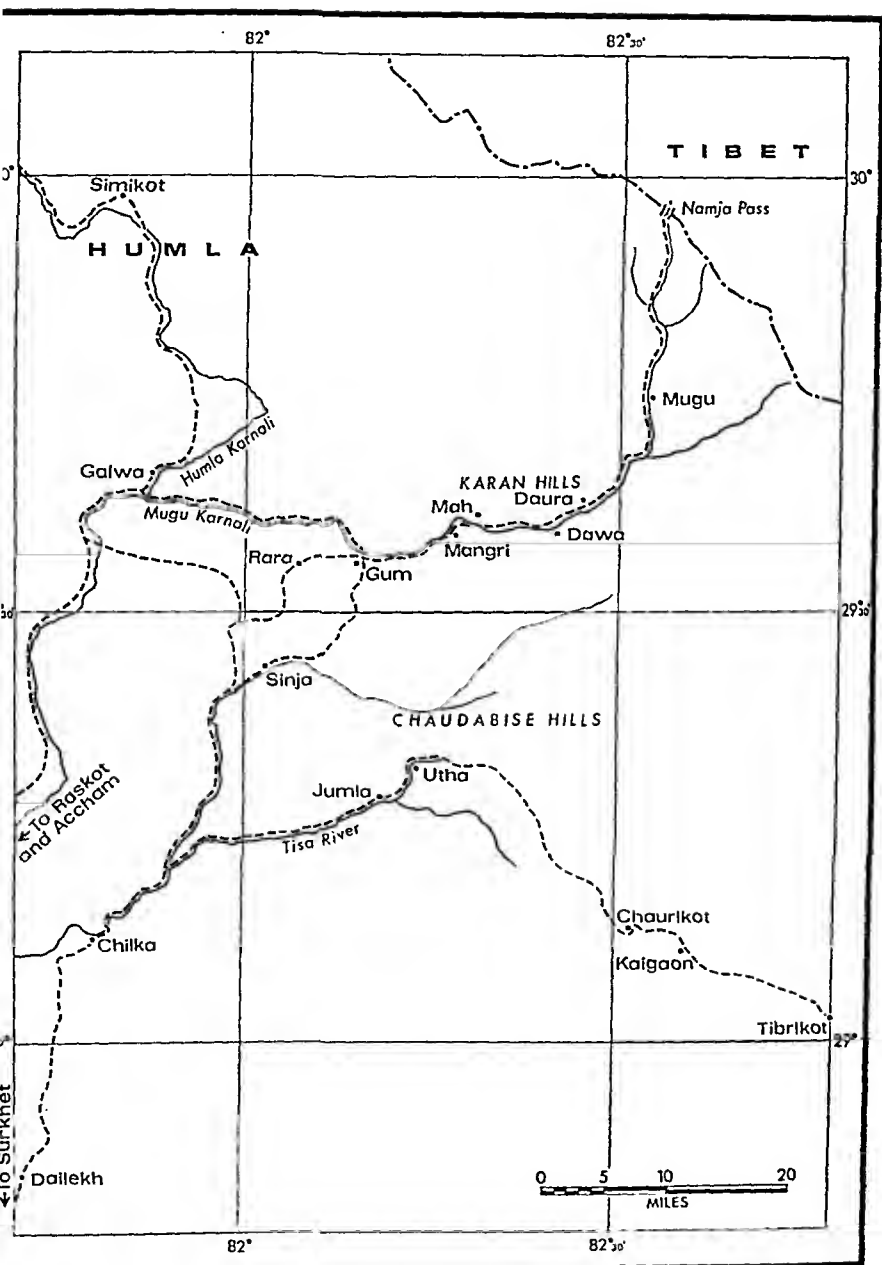


## Traders of the Karnali Zone

The north-western region of Nepal, drained by the Humla and Mugu Karnali, has for centuries been the scene of intensive interaction between Buddhist Tibetan-speaking populations inhabiting the highlands north of the main Himalayan range, and Nepali-speaking Hindus, who, based on ancient principalities in the middle-ranges, penetrated into many of the high valleys close to the Tibetan border. Whereas in most of the other frontier-regions of Nepal reliable historical data extend over barely a hundred years, our knowledge of Western Nepal covers a span of close on seven centuries. It is largely due to the initiative of Giuseppe Tucci, followed up by Nepalese and Indian scholars, that the history of the north-westernmost part of Nepal is known in broad outline. The discovery of monuments and inscriptions in various villages in the vicinity of Jumla as well as in Dullu and Dailekh, and the study of chronicles (*vamśāvali*) of princely families and of copper-plates (*tāmrapatra*) and their comparison with Tibetan chronicles has made it possible to discern the rise and fall of dynasties which ruled over Western Nepal and the neighbouring regions of Tibet.\*

As early as the eleventh century A.D. tribes speaking Aryan languages and subsequently described as Khas, invaded Western Tibet, where they founded petty states and ultimately tibetanized their names and customs. By the end of the twelfth century such Khas invaders had conquered the kingdoms of Purang and Guge, and probably also Ladakh. In the thirteenth century a dynasty bearing the family name Malla united Purang, Guge and Western Nepal and established its southern capital at Sinja to the north of Jumla. Subsequently the rule of the Mallas was extended as far as Dullu to the south-west, and to Kashikot to the east. The apex of

\* See G. Tucci, *Nepal: The Discovery of the Mallas*, New York 1962; Prayag Raj Sharma, *Preliminary study of the Art and Architecture of the Karnali Basin, West Nepal*, Paris 1972.





The village of Tsharka, Dolpo  
The Gompa settlement of Tarakot, Tichurong

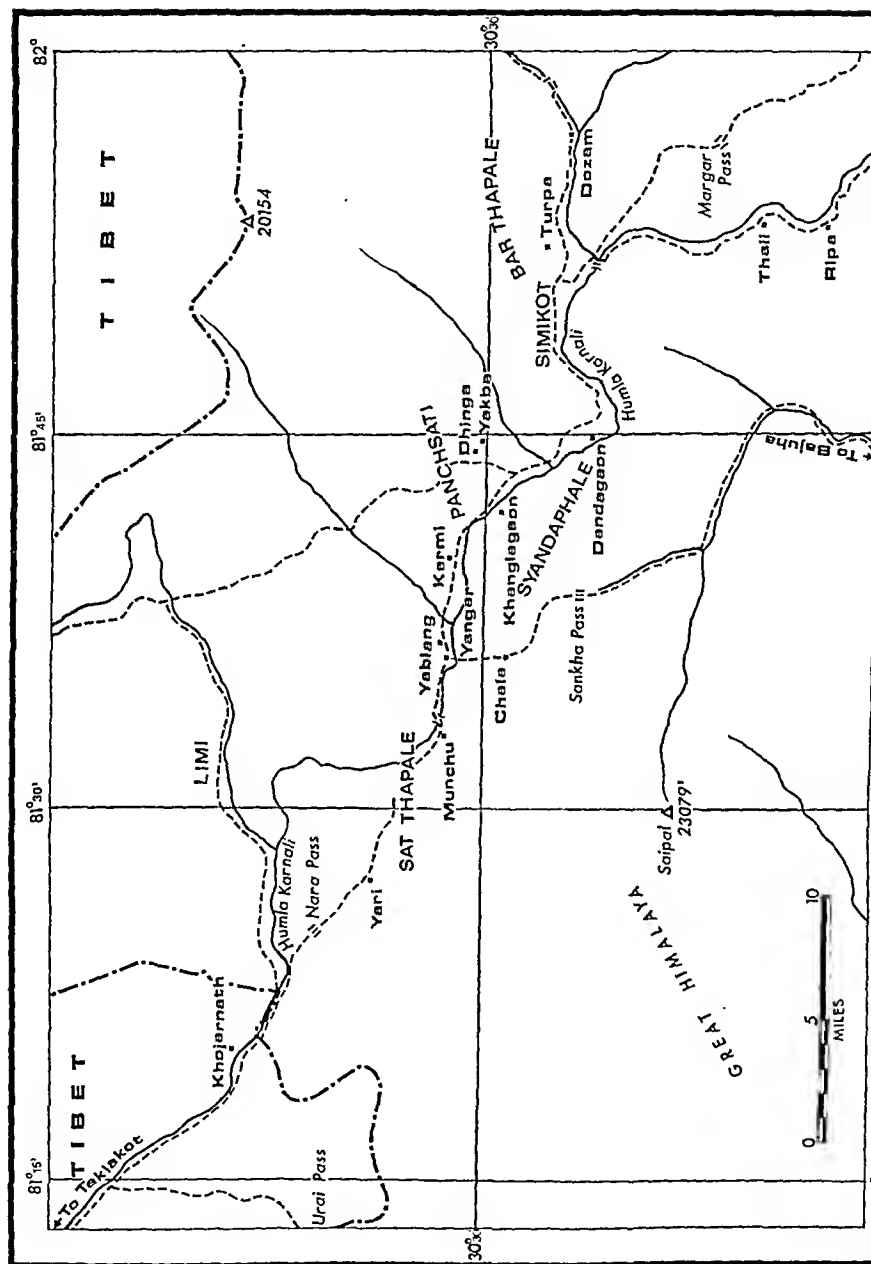


The reincarnate Bonpo lama of Parlä (centre) with two monks  
The ceremonial unwrapping and reciting of sacred books  
in Kani, Tichurong

their power was reached by King Prithvimalla, who ruled in the middle of the fourteenth century. The numerous stone monuments and temples erected in his time reflect the high standard of civilization and prosperity attained under the rule of the Mallas. The construction of roads marked by pillars bearing dated inscriptions facilitated the growth of trade between the Tibetan and the Nepalese provinces of the kingdom. This trade linked Western Tibet with the plains of India, and Purang, the present Taklakot, must have been as important a commercial centre as it is today. No doubt it served already as an entrepôt where Tibetan salt was stored and ultimately bartered for grain brought from the lower regions of Nepal.

After Prithvimalla the kingdom broke up into a number of principalities ruled by local chieftains, and one of these established himself at Sinja. As master of the prestigious old capital, and hence known as Sinjapatti, he exercised his overlordship over the petty chiefs of a large domain which included Jumla. At the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries many Rajput princes of Rajasthan and other parts of India had to yield to the pressure of Muslim invaders, and sought refuge in the western Himalayas. It was then that Thakuri chiefs of the Kalial clan gained possession of Jumla. There are several conflicting accounts of the way in which they replaced the former rulers of Sinja, but documents and legends agree that Baliraj (1404-45) was the first of the Kalial kings. Rajas of that dynasty ruled over Sinja and Jumla until their overthrow by Gorkha armies in 1787, and it was during the time of their rule that Thakuris of the Kalial clan established themselves in many of the valleys of Humla. Local traditions in that area refer fairly generally to thirteen generations of Thakuri settlers. The backing of their princely kinsmen at the centre of power must have enabled them to gain a dominant position among the Bhotias with whom they shared their habitat. The interaction of these two populations will presently be discussed in greater detail, but it would seem that an overlapping and dovetailing of Tibetan and Nepali ethnic elements has been a characteristic feature of the Jumla area at various periods in its history. In Sinja there is a tradition of battles with Bhotia armies, as well as a legend of the presence of a lama with magical powers at the court of the Sinja king.

In this context, however, we are mainly concerned with the fact that Humla is the only border region of Nepal where members of



high Hindu castes engage in the trade with Tibet on equal terms with the local Bhotia population. The situation is hence quite different from that prevailing in areas such as Khumbu, Walongchung, Thak Khola, Dolpo and Tarakot where the trans-Himalayan trade was always entirely in the hands of Tibeto-Burman speaking Buddhist communities that acted as the natural intermediaries between Tibet and the Hindu and tribal populations of the middle-ranges of Nepal.

Within the domains of first the Malla kings and later the Kaliai rajas of Jumla two main routes served the trade with Tibet and these two routes correspond to the two branches of the Karnali river system, the Mugu Karnali and the Humla Karnali. The route through Humla is the more important in so far as the volume of trade is concerned, but in order to maintain the continuity of description in terms of the geographic progression westwards from Thak Khola and Dolpo I shall deal first with the Mugu route which runs through an area immediately adjoining Dolpo.

### *Bhotias of the Mugu region*

To the north-west of Dolpo, and separated from this region by the mountain range which forms the watershed between the Bheri and the Karnali, lies a group of Bhotia villages, by far the largest and the most important of which is Mugu. It gives its name to the whole area and figures already in the autobiographies of a Dolpo lama dating from the early sixteenth century.\* At that time the region of Mugu, known in Tibetan as Mugum, formed part of the Jumla kingdom, and up to the present day the Bhotias of Mugu have maintained manifold contacts with the small market town of Jumla.

Owing to its position within ten miles of the Tibetan frontier, Mugu itself was for many years inaccessible to foreign scholars as political considerations compelled the government of Nepal to restrict travel in sensitive border areas. But during a period of fieldwork in 1966 I was able to pay a brief visit to some other villages in the valley of the Mugu Karnali, and at that time I also encountered a number of men and women of Mugu proper. The information I then gathered was amplified in 1972, when I travelled for several weeks with porters from one of the villages of the Karan region.

\* David Snellgrove, *Four Lamas of Dolpo*, pp. 117, 118.

The village of Mugu lies on the banks of the Mugu Karnali at an altitude of about 11,000 feet.\* In 1966 it consisted of more than 100 well-built, 3-storeyed houses and there are 3 *gompa* in the vicinity. The area of cultivable land is very limited and agriculture has always played a subsidiary rôle in the community's economy.

The main crops grown are potatoes, buckwheat, a variety of wheat known locally as *naphal*, and radishes, and there can be no doubt that as among the Sherpas potatoes are a relatively recent introduction. There is no regular rotation of crops. Most people divide their land between buckwheat and potatoes, but some families grow only potatoes and some only buckwheat or only wheat.

In contrast to the inhabitants of other villages in the region, the Bhotias of Mugu do not plough with draught animals but either dig up the soil with hoes or use a plough drawn by teams of several men. Yet the Mugu people own numerous yak and these are used almost exclusively as pack animals and – surprisingly enough – are never milked. Butter is bought from the lower-lying regions of Nepal. The number of yak owned by Mugu people has always been large. In 1966 a figure of 1,000 yak was mentioned and in 1972 I was told that annually over 200 yak were sold to Mugu by people of Limi (p. 250). There are no common cattle in Mugu and the villagers do not breed hybrids, though occasionally they buy some from lower-lying villages of the region.

As long as there were no restrictions on contacts between the Bhotias of Mugu and the population of the adjoining region of Tibet, the Mugu people kept large flocks of sheep and every October they drove these to Tibetan pastures and entrusted them into the care of friendly Tibetan herdsman, paying a seasonal fee of 2 lbs of grain per sheep. The Tibetans grazing the sheep were entitled to use them as pack animals, and to retain half the butter produced from the milk of the ewes. However, the sheep were milked only from April until June. In the latter month they were brought back to Mugu pastures where, strangely enough, the ewes were not milked. When the Chinese occupied Tibet this arrangement had to be abandoned and as the Mugu people own no alternative winter pastures the breeding of sheep has been discontinued. For although Mugu people may still cross the Tibetan border, the Chinese

\* The altitude of 12,000 feet indicated on the survey of India map is incorrect according to measurements by Dr. Harka Gurning.



authorities do not allow any dealings with Tibetans. It seems that the breeding of yak has been affected less seriously by the termination of the traditional herding arrangements, for winter pastures suitable for yak are found in the region of Chaudabise Khola. There are no subsidiary settlements comparable to the Sherpas' *yorsa* and *gunsa* either in the high hills or in the lower valleys but yak-herders have camping sites with stone-walled enclosures. Hay is made and stored, and in addition Mugu people buy hay from lower-lying villages at a rate of R1 for twenty bundles and carry the hay on their backs to Mugu.

The large village of Mugu proper represents a distinct cultural unit and the topography of the Mugu Karnali valley is such that there is no scope for other villages in the immediate neighbourhood. Further downstream there is a region known as Karan where settlements are situated at altitudes between 7,500 and 8,500 feet. The inhabitants of these villages are conscious of their different cultural identity even though they speak the same language as the people of Mugu and occasionally intermarry with them.

In the same way as the prosperity of Walongchung and Namche Bazar traditionally depended almost entirely on trans-Himalayan trade, Mugu has always been predominantly a settlement of traders. Within easy reach of Tibet and of the rich grain-growing areas of Sinja and Jumla, it could attain a key position in the profitable salt-and-grain-trade.

To purchase salt the Mugu people went with caravans of yak to Cheptu a place inside Tibet, which lies some three days' journey to the north across the Nangja pass. Cheptu was apparently not a settlement with a permanent population, but a mart where people of Mugu and Tibetan Drokpas (known locally also as Chobas) foregathered to exchange grain and salt. Until the 1940s not only Mugu Bhotias but also people of the Karan region went to trade in Cheptu, but some twenty-five years ago the Mugu men established a monopoly in this trade and prevented traders from lower regions from going beyond Mugu. The resultant dispute lasted for several years, and finally the Karan people obtained a government order (*lalmohar*) confirming their right to pass through Mugu on their way to the border marts. However, since about 1965/6 Cheptu has been abandoned as a mart, because

the Chinese authorities prevented the Drokpas from going there. Instead Pongdzu, a locality two to three days' journey from Cheptu has been developed as the main mart for the trade of that region. In 1972 Karan people travelling to Pongdzu were held up for some time in Mugu, but were ultimately able to proceed although the Mugu people were adamant in preventing any Nepali-speaking Hindu from passing through their territory. Other Bhotias, such as the Mandara Khambas, on the other hand, are – somewhat grudgingly – permitted to trade at Pongdzu. There was then no Chinese trade depot at Pongdzu, and the people from Nepal could barter directly with Drokpas.

At the beginning of the trading season when the passes open after the winter, the twelve villages of Karan combine to send two or three messengers, who assess the market, and agree with the Drokpas on a definite rate for the exchange of grain and salt. The Karan traders make usually only one trip whereas the Mugu people undertake annually three to four journeys to Pongdzu. They have closer ties with the Drokpas and usually get more favourable exchange rates than the Karan people. Apart from salt the traders from both Mugu and Karan obtain in Pongdzu their requirements of Tibetan wool. The exchange rate is calculated by weight; four units of wheat- or barley-flour are given for one of wool. Most of this wool is used for domestic purposes but the people of Mugu also sell some wool to Bhotias from the lower regions at a rate of one to six or seven units of flour.

In recent years the trade in Tibetan salt and wool, and with it the prosperity of Mugu, seems to have declined, and the efforts of the Mugu people to exclude other traders from the route through the Mugu valley may be motivated by the shrinking of their trade. The ultimate cause of this dwindling of supplies must be sought in the control which the Chinese exercise over the pattern of trade. All signs point to the fact that they are trying to reduce the number of trade-routes, and are channelling most supplies through Taklakot.

Such salt as still comes through Mugu is being sold mainly in the rice-growing areas of Gum and the Sinja valley where people from Mugu and Karan barter it for rice at a rate of 1:1. They take it

there by yak or *dzo*, or even on their own backs. Moreover, some of the Hindu villagers of the Jumla region take their grain by sheep caravans to Mugu and exchange it there for salt.

Until about 1959, when political events in Tibet led to severe restrictions on trade with Nepal, all salt consumed in Jumla was of Tibetan origin, but during the years of acute shortage of Tibetan salt (1959-63), the pattern of consumption changed, and today Indian salt dominates the market. People owning either sheep or horses buy Indian salt in Nepalganj, and sell it for cash in Jumla. It is not profitable to bring Indian salt by porters to Jumla, for the wage of a porter carrying some 80 lbs of salt, worth R10 in Nepalganj, amounts to R100. While people from Mugu and Karan can still dispose of their salt in the villages of the Jumla region, their monopoly has been broken, and their market is inevitably shrinking as communications in the middle-ranges of Nepal improve.

For the people of Mugu proper this is a serious threat, for in the vicinity of their village the valley of the Karnali does not provide much scope for agriculture. Further downstream, where the valley broadens and similarly in the valley of the Langu river, a tributary of the Mugu Karnali, the terrain lends itself better to the cultivation of crops and the development of permanent settlements. This region, lying between 7,500-9,000 feet, is known as Karan, and according to my preliminary inquiries conducted in 1966, there were then some 300 houses distributed over 13 villages.

The largest of these is Mangri, a village of 55 houses, and it was there that I collected most of my information on the Karan region. While in Mugu there are seven exogamous clans, the entire population of Karan consists of the members of two Bhotia clans of good status and a number of Garas, low-class blacksmiths comparable to the Kamis of Nepalese Hindu society. Inter-marriage between Mugu and Karan is rare, and whereas some Karan girls have been known to marry men of Mugu there are hardly any cases of Mugu women marrying and settling down in Karan. The explanation offered is that Mugu girls are inexperienced in agricultural work and that for this reason they would not make satisfactory wives for the farmers of Karan.

Although many of the inhabitants of Karan do some trading in grain and salt, for the greater part of their subsistence they rely on

agriculture and animal husbandry. The people of Mangri village, for instance, have transformed the whole hillside below their village into an elaborate system of terraced fields, each plot being surrounded and supported by well-built stone walls. It is this extensive use of stone in addition to the presence of a few three-tiered *chorten*, which lends the place an atmosphere quite different from that of all the Hindu villages of the adjacent region to the south-west.

On their terraced fields the Mangri people grow barley, millet, buckwheat, beans, lentils, potatoes and chillies. Barley is sown in October/November and reaped in May/June, but all other crops are sown in April/May and harvested in October/November. Winter and monsoon crops are cultivated on the same fields and this double-cropping necessitates considerable manuring.

The agricultural implements are exceptionally primitive. The plough, drawn by a single small bullock, is the nearest approximation to a hoe dragged across a field to be found anywhere in Nepal or India. It is so inefficient that one would think the tillers would find it easier and more effective to dig up the field with hoes. Only small patches are ploughed at a time and each furrow is only a few yards long. A woman or small boy leads the bullock by a nose-rope, the ploughman pushes the miniature plough and the bullock makes a few steps but is turned round before more than the shortest and shallowest of furrows has been cut. The plough is fixed to a short cross-piece of wood which in turn is connected with the yoke by two ropes between which the bullock walks. Thus the plough is pulled forward but does not derive any stability from a firm connection with a yoke, and the ploughman has to manipulate it all the time.

Some men plough with cross-breeds, but the total number of male and female *dzo* owned by the people of Mangri was at the time of my visit only 15, while the number of common cows and bullocks was about 100. A *dzo* then cost R200 but a cow or bullock could be bought for R60-80. There were also some 50 sheep and 60 goats in Mangri. During the months of June to September the cattle are taken to higher pastures and the herdsmen stay there in temporary huts and tents.

The quantity of wool which their own sheep yield is not sufficient to meet the local needs, and Mangri weavers procure

wool either direct from Tibet or by way of middlemen from Mugu. In 1966 they could get their wool for cash, paying R10-15 per *dharni* (5 lbs). Most householders make one annual trading journey to Tibet, and go twice a year to Mugu to buy salt and wool. Many women weave multi-coloured blankets and such blankets figure prominently in their trade with the Hindu populations of the lower regions. In the winter some Mángri people go to the Terai and purchase machine-made cotton cloth in the bazaar of Nepal-ganj. Thus men of Karan span in their modest trading enterprises, the entire breadth of the Himalayan zone from the Gangetic plains to the Tibetan plateau.

Though the people of Mangri and other villages of the Karan region do not engage in large-scale trade and neither their houses nor their material possessions are of a standard comparable to that of the Sherpas or Thakalis, they have been able to devote considerable resources to the construction and embellishment of religious buildings. In Mangri there is an impressive *gompa* richly decorated with frescoes, which was constructed in 1949 on the initiative of a Tibetan lama. Other villages of the Karan region built *gompa* at about the same time, and it would seem that throughout this area there was then an efflorescence of Buddhist community life comparable to a similar phenomenon in Khumbu some twenty years earlier. The funds needed for the construction of the Mangri *gompa* were raised entirely within the village and it is remarkable that a comparatively small community of subsistence cultivators in a not very favourable environment could be inspired to put up a large temple and spend several thousand rupees on its decoration.

The distinctiveness of the cultural atmosphere in these Bhotia villages is highlighted by the fact that in artistic merit and elaborate equipment their *gompa* surpass anything to be found in the Hindu villages of the adjoining valleys. In those respects, even the famous Goraksa temple of Jumla compares unfavourably with quite an ordinary village *gompa* such as that of Mangri. Yet, the people of Mugu and Karan are in an economically much less favourable position than the Thakuris and Chetris of the rich rice-growing areas of Jumla and Sinja. Socially too they are looked down upon by their Hindu neighbours. As eaters of beef and drinkers of alcoholic beverages they share the low status of most of the Bhotia populations in Nepal's Hindu-dominated caste-system.

However, their response to this situation is different from that of either the Sherpas or the Bhotias of Baragaon. While the former are proud to identify themselves as Sherpas and the Baragaonlis now claim to be Gurungs (see p. 152), the Mugu people describe themselves as Chetris and even call themselves by such genuine Chetri clan-names as Rokha and Burathoki. In all my first contacts with Mugu men, some of whom I had met already on the way from Jajarkot to Jumla, I was mystified by the strange phenomenon of people obviously Bhotia in appearance and dress calling themselves by Chetri clan-names. Later I discovered that when speaking in their own Tibetan dialect, they used different names. They admitted that the Chetri names were equivalents which they had been using only for the past four decades. 'We heard these names in Sinja,' explained one Mangri villager, 'and started using them when we talk to Nepalis.'

The situation has been even more confused by the practice of government officials classifying the Bhotias of Mugu and Karan as Tamang, even though there is no apparent connection with the Tamang tribe of Central and Eastern Nepal and most Mugu people have never met any Tamangs and know nothing about them. The explanation for this odd nomenclature is the policy, reputedly introduced by the prime-minister Jang Bahadur Rana, not to use the term 'Bhotia' for any community settled within the frontiers of Nepal. The motivation for this policy decision was probably the wish to forestall any future claim of Tibet to border areas inhabited by Tibetan-speaking populations hitherto described as Bhotias, i.e. Tibetans.

The present habit of the Mugu and Karan people of claiming Chetri status would seem to throw some light on the puzzling problem of the so-called 'Matwali' Chetris of the Jumla district. The expression 'Matwali Chetri' represents a contradiction in terms, because *matwali* ('drinker of alcoholic beverages') is a designation normally used to distinguish the lower castes and tribal communities from the twice-born castes such as Brahmans and Chetris, whose caste-rules forbid the drinking of *mat*. But in the Jumla district there are substantial populations described as Matwali Chetris who in outward appearance and standards of living seem to be closer to such tribal groups as Magars than to the proper Chetris of the region. They speak Nepali and their clan

names are the same as those of 'pure' Chetris, but they do not wear the sacred thread and do not have Brahman family priests.\* Among the Bhotias of Mugu and Karan the first tentative attempts at a change of ethnic identity can be observed at the present time, and it is not inconceivable that the intensification of contacts with Hindu populations might result in the incorporation of at least some groups among the so-called Matwali Chetris, some of whom have been known to interdine and tolerate marital unions with Bhotias.

During the winter, many Mugu people travel south in the same way as Dolpo villagers move to Tarakot and other villages of Tichurong. But whereas the hosts of the Dolpo people are themselves Buddhists and speak a Tibeto-Burman language, the inhabitants of Jumla and other villages where Mugu people have trade contacts and find work as seasonal labourers are high-caste Hindus and culturally quite dissimilar to the Bhotias of the border regions. Aware of the feeling of superiority encountered among the people of the middle-ranges and the Terai, the Mugu people are not keen on advertising their identity as Bhotias and Buddhists, even though in their own villages they may be diligent in the support of religious practices and institutions.

In the previous chapter we have seen that in the Dolpo and Tichurong regions high-altitude Bhotias and the inhabitants of such villages as Tarakot play clearly distinguished rôles in the overall trading systems. The Bhotias obtain salt and wool from Tibet and bring it as far as Tichurong, whence the Taralis transport it with caravans of sheep and goats to the villages of the middle-ranges, a region the Bhotias seldom enter. Only on short stretches in Dolpo do the trading operations of the two populations overlap. In Jumla on the other hand, Matwali Chetris of villages within a day's walk from Sinja and the town of Jumla, operate on trade-routes covered also by people of Mugu and Karan. Their expeditions take them as far north as places close to the Tibetan frontier and as far south as the Terai and thus they compete with traders of such Karan villages as Mangri on the latter's own ground. One example may be quoted in detail:

\* The position of these Matwali Chetris has been discussed at greater length in my article 'Status and Interaction among the high Hindu castes of Nepal', *The Eastern Anthropologist*, Vol. 24, 1971, pp. 7-24.

The men of Uthu, a village of Matwali Chetris, a few miles north-east of Jumla, regularly visit Mugu, where they barter rice and other grain for Tibetan salt, and then take the salt on the backs of sheep to Jajarkot and sell it there for cash. From there they descend to the Terai where they peddle medicinal herbs collected in the high hills, and with the cash received from such sales as well as from the earlier sale of salt, they purchase cotton textiles and other manufactured goods. This trade is similar to that carried on by the Bhotias of Karan and Mugu, but I have found no sign of any animosity between the various communities of traders engaged in the trade ranging from the border with India almost as far as the Tibetan border.

Modes of transport are usually determined by altitude and terrain but a comparison between the mechanics of the movements of goods through the Jumla region with the caravan trade passing through the valley of the Kali Gandaki shows that there are also culturally conditioned differences not easily explicable by the respective characteristics of the topography. While along the Kali Gandaki route ponies, mules and donkeys carry the bulk of the goods in both directions, the people of Jumla use pack-ponies only to a limited extent for the transport of salt, grain or other commodities. This is all the more surprising as they specialize in the breeding of horses, hundreds of which can be seen on large open pastures, locally known as *chaur*, set in between the forested hills at altitudes between 8,000 and 10,000 feet. Most of these horses are ultimately sold in the Terai. Mules and donkeys are virtually non-existent in Jumla; men and caravans of sheep and goats are the main means of transport in the zones below the level where yak and yak cattle cross-breeds (*dzo*) can be employed. This situation is all the more inexplicable as in many parts of Jumla district there are stretches of broad bridle-paths which must have been a feature of the ancient kingdoms of Jumla and Sinja, and which in places are still marked by stone monuments several centuries old.

### *The population pattern of Humla*

Humla, the northernmost region of Nepal, consists of a valley system enclosed by the Saipal range and the Takh Himal and Changla Himal along which runs the political frontier with Tibet.



Surrounded by rugged mountains on three sides it is open only at its southern end where the Humla Karnali joins the waters of the Mugu Karnali. It was through this gap that several centuries ago Nepali-speaking Hindus infiltrated into Humla, and established themselves in the lower parts of the valleys while the higher regions remained in the possession of Bhotias. The close proximity and interlocking of Hindu and Buddhist communities of different cultural traditions is one of the characteristic features of the ethnographic pattern of Humla, and one which distinguishes the area from all those discussed in the earlier chapters.

There are two routes which lead from Jumla to Simikot, the administrative centre of Humla. The one which crosses two major passes is open from about April throughout the monsoon and until the first heavy snowfalls in October or November, and the other, which follows the course of the Humla river, is used mainly during the winter. The former route is the easier one and can be negotiated by horses and laden *dzo*, whereas the route through the Humla gorges is passable only for men, sheep and goats.

The villages lying on the higher route are inhabited by populations of a variety of ethnic affiliations. The largest element consists of Matwali Chetris but in places such as Darma, in the valley of the Miniban Khola, one of the main tributaries of the Humla Karnali, there are separate hamlets of Upadhya and Jaisi Brahmans, Thakuris and Chetris. This is an ethnic composition no different from that prevailing in many villages close to Sinja and Jumla. However, half a day's walk from Darma lies the village of Melcham whose inhabitants are of distinctly Mongoloid appearance and resemble Bhotias not only in physical features but in their style of dress and ornaments. Many of them have purely Tibetan names and they have built *chorten* which are referred to as *gompa* and bear Tibetan inscriptions. Yet the people of Melcham speak Nepali and describe themselves as Matwali Chetris. According to their own traditions they came from Byans, a region in the extreme north-west of Nepal, and other Matwali Chetris regard them as a distinct group even though they call themselves by such Chetri clan names as Bura and Rokaya. Similar people, locally often referred to as Byansi, are settled in several villages on the route to Simikot, and apart from engaging in agriculture they all trade with Tibet and the lower regions of Nepal. Their ambivalent position between Chetris

and Bhotias is reflected in the fact that they employ lamas to conduct their funeral rites although otherwise they do not perform any Buddhist rituals.

Interspersed between villages of such mixed populations are settlements of Thakuris who have close affinal relations to high-ranking Thakuris of areas as far distant as Sinja and even Jajarkot.

Simikot, a cluster of settlements occupying the rim of a large flat ledge at an altitude of some 10,500 feet, is now the centre of the administration of Humla and headquarters of the chief district officer and a number of other government officials. Its permanent population, consisting of Chetris and untouchable artisans, has not played a particularly prominent rôle in the affairs of the region, and there is no indication that Simikot was ever a trading centre comparable to such entrepôts as Tukche in Thak Khola or Namche Bazar in Khumbu. Within a radius of some five miles from Simikot on the steep slopes to both sides of the Humla Karnali, lie the northernmost Thakuri settlements and beyond them one enters a zone inhabited solely by Bhotia populations.

Though in the framework of the present study I am concerned mainly with the high-altitude dwellers of Bhotia stock, a consideration of the neighbouring Thakuris cannot be completely omitted. For not only do the Thakuris share to a great extent the Bhotias' environment, but the two communities, though avoiding any form of miscegenation, cooperate in many economic activities and form part of one political system.

### *The settlement pattern*

The majority of the villages of Humla conform to a pattern which extends over a large part of the Karnali zone irrespective of ethnographic and linguistic boundaries. Thakuris, Matwali Chetris and Bhotias live in villages of very similar type, though in the internal arrangements of their houses these communities evince certain distinctive features. Houses are built wall to wall in such a way that their flat roofs form a large terrace on which one can move from house to house without having to get down to the ground. In the local Nepali dialect such a line of houses is called *pangri* and in some settlements each line stands by itself clearly separated from the other rows of houses. However, there are

villages where the principle of clustering is taken one step further and houses cling to a slope with each house touching the one below and the one above. Seen from a distance such a compact settlement resembles a large fortress, but a maze of narrow lanes gives access to the individual blocks of houses. In winter conditions such compact villages have obvious advantages, because the inhabitants can move from house to house without having to battle through stretches of deep snow. Examples of such fort-like villages are Kermi, Yalbang and Yangar on the hillsides above the Humla Karnali, but as one moves from the narrow river gorge to the more open country of Munchu and Yari the settlement pattern changes. At Yari, the last village before the Nara pass and the Chinese frontier, for instance, houses stand by themselves or in small groups, even though the fierce wind and severe cold would seem to make mutual protection highly desirable. A similar pattern prevails among a group of villages known as Barthapale which lies to the north-east of Simikot. There too the splendid large and solidly built houses are mainly free-standing.

It is not possible to correlate these settlement types with specific ethnic groups. Throughout the greater part of Nepal dispersed settlements are characteristic of the Hindu castes of Brahmans, Thakuris and Chetris, but in Humla members of these same communities live in houses built wall to wall in long rows and double rows. Conversely in the Bhotia settlements of areas such as Dolpo houses stand alone or in groups of two or three, while the majority of the Bhotias of Humla dwell in tightly clustered villages.

The terrain, no doubt, affects the arrangement of houses and where a village is confined within the limits of a narrow gorge, houses inevitably crowd closely together, whereas a wide valley such as that of Yari offers opportunities for more widely dispersed habitations.

A system of alternative settlements situated at different altitudes recalls the pattern of principal and subsidiary villages among the Sherpas of Khumbu. In Humla too the needs of agriculture and animal husbandry have led the local population to utilize the resources of all parts of their environment, and this can be done most effectively by creating firm bases in different parts of the land owned by a village community. The establishment of small secondary

dwelling, referred to in Nepali as *goth*, near pastures or minor plots for cultivation is a practice widespread in the hills of Nepal, but many of the Bhotias of Humla own houses of about equal size and quality in two different localities, one near the level of the main river valley and one at high altitude close to the tree-line. In such a situation one cannot speak of main and secondary settlements, because the dwellings in both are of roughly similar standard, and the villagers divide their time about equally between their two residences.

An example of this system is provided by the village community of Dhinga. The people of this community, which in 1972 consisted of 35 households, have an upper settlement known as Dhinga Laga, and a lower settlement referred to as Dhinga Shyo. The terms *yorsa* (corresponding to *лага*) and *gunsa* (corresponding to *श्यो*) are understood but normally not used. The 35 houses of Dhinga Laga stand at an altitude of some 12,000 feet in one compact cluster on a gently sloping site between open pasture land, interspersed with walled-in fields on which buckwheat, mustard-oil seed and radishes are grown. A hill above the village is covered with mixed pine and deciduous forest, but most of the surrounding slopes are bare of tree growth, and snow-covered mountains rise above them. This settlement lies in a side valley above the summer settlement of the village of Yakba, and on the route to distant Limi, whose people come to Dhinga in late October or early November with caravans of yak bringing salt and wool to barter for grain. Thus for a few days in the year upper Dhinga is turned into a trade-mart.

In the autumn the Dhinga people descend some 2,500 feet to their land in the main valley of the Humla Karnali where they live during the winter months in three separate settlements: Tangdok with 23 houses, Sabtung with 4 houses, and Chopaka with 8 houses. Thus every one of the 35 households of Dhinga owns a homestead in both the upper and the lower settlement. The houses of the lower settlements are scattered over the steep slopes on which pasture-land alternates with plots bearing summer crops of millet and buckwheat and winter crops of wheat and barley.

Families do not necessarily move in a body from one settlement to the other, for there are times of the year, such as the early autumn, when there is work to be done at the upper as well as the lower level. During such periods both Dhinga Laga and Dhinga Shyo are inhabited and there is a good deal of commuting from the one to the other, the journey taking a man or woman without load not more than two hours.

The village-communities of Yakba and Tangen, whose land immediately adjoins that of Dhinga, have also upper and lower settlements, but in their cases the lower settlements are by far the more substantial. Kermi, a big village in the Karnali valley, half a day's walk upstream from lower Dhinga, on the other hand, has no alternative settlement, and when the cattle-owners among the inhabitants drive their herds to the high pastures, they live there in tents.

Thus it appears that in Humla two settlement patterns coexist in close proximity. Dhinga represents a model comparable to the Sherpa practice of building solid houses at different altitudes while the people of Kermi provide a parallel to the Dolpo custom of living on the high pastures in tents, and having only one solid house per family. The same variety of settlement styles becomes evident as one moves up the Humla valley. Yalbang, the next village after Kermi and situated on a ledge just above the river, is basically a winter settlement, and during the summer and early autumn the inhabitants live at Poyun, which lies high up in the mountains on the other side of the Humla Karnali. The villages between Yalbang and the pass leading to Taklakot, on the other hand, namely Yangar, Munchu and Yari, are simple all-season settlements, whose inhabitants own no alternative houses at higher or lower altitude.

The possession of houses in two settlements at different altitudes and the resultant seasonal change of residence are not confined to the Bhotia of Humla. The same pattern occurs among Thakuri communities.

Thus the large Thakuri village of Daragaon, which contains 100 households of Thakuris, 16 of Kami blacksmiths and 1 Damai tailor family, is a winter settlement situated on a broad ledge only a few hundred feet above the Humla river. In the

summer the inhabitants move to 4 settlements with 32, 13, 22 and 22 houses respectively. Only 2 watchmen, periodically appointed village officials, remain in the main village, their principal task being to guard the growing crops on the surrounding fields against cattle trespass. Unlike the Bhotias of the nearby villages of Yakba and Dhinga the Thakuris of Daragaon do not own yak and hence need not spend any time at pastures of great altitudes. However, they own about 300 *dzo* and 100 other cross-breeds apart from 400 cows and 1,200 sheep and goats. These animals are grazed near the upper settlements where there is also cultivation on high slopes. As in other localities the need to spread agricultural activities over as wide an environmental range as possible is one of the incentives for the establishment of subsidiary settlements.

## *Houses*

The houses of most Bhotia villages conform to a standard pattern. They are all built solidly of stone and timber, but whereas the walls of the majority of houses are constructed of rubble held together by a mixture of mud and sand, and often covered by a mud-plaster, some villagers build houses of fashioned stone which requires no plastering. The finest houses of that type are found in four villages of Barthapale. There the stone-work is held together by wooden beams marking each floor, and these beams are used to secure the floor-boards of the upper storeys.

The ground floor invariably serves as a cattle-shed and may be sub-divided into two or three compartments. On the first floor, which is reached by a notched ladder giving access to a veranda, there is the main living-room with a fire-place in its centre, and this is usually flanked by two narrow store-rooms. The furnishing of the living-room depends on the economic status of the house-owner. In the houses of the wealthy there may be a smooth floor of wooden boards, and a small window of attractively carved lattice work. Against the wall stand wooden store-boxes, often also adorned with carvings, and behind the owner's seat at the fire-place there are shelves bearing silver drinking cups, cooking vessels, and sometimes some ritual objects such as copper prayer-wheels, rosaries and brass cups for offerings. In front of the owner's seat

there is usually a low table, and similar small tables only a few inches high may be provided for honoured guests. Other family members sit at meal times round the hearth, placing their dishes on the floor or holding them in their lap.

A few houses contain separate small rooms, usually on the floor above, which are furnished as Buddhist chapels, with a small altar, some small statues and ritual objects, and perhaps several hand-printed liturgical books.

Neither the main living-room nor their chapels can compare in size and fittings with the corresponding portions of a wealthy Sherpa's house, but they show nevertheless a sense of aesthetic values totally absent in the houses of even the wealthiest of Thakuris of Humla, who make no effort to furnish their homes with anything beyond the most basic necessities.

An important feature of every house is the flat roof, often enclosed on two sides by covered galleries, which may give access to small rooms such as those accommodating a chapel. The roof is used as a general work-space, for threshing crops, spreading out grain and drying sliced radishes. From this roof one can look down into the living-room through a smoke-hole, and in some houses an inside ladder leads from the gallery to the floor below. All the bigger houses have a second tier of roof-space above the galleries along the main roof, and that tier too is used for drying grain.

Thus Bhotias of Humla operate in their houses on four levels, and in villages such as those of Barthapale, where houses are unusually large, the inhabitants enjoy, in so far as space is concerned, a living standard higher than that of any other community of Western Nepal.

## *Agriculture*

The agricultural practices of the inhabitants of Humla share many features with those prevailing in other regions of high altitude on Nepal's northern borders. They extend over a very wide range of different levels, and thus involve a seasonal mobility far greater than that required of cultivators in the lower-lying parts of the country. In an environment totally lacking large compact areas of cultivable land, the members of a community have to utilize a large number of scattered plots in order to extract the maximum

yield from a basically unpromising land. Much of the cultivated acreage is marginal, and has to be allowed long periods of fallow if the soil is not to be exhausted and exposed to rapid erosion.

However, unlike regions such as Khumbu, Dolpo or even Thak Khola, Humla consists not only of very high country with a very short cultivating season, but comprises also some relatively low valleys, cut deeply into the tangle of hills, where sheltered from extremes of climate, crops such as rice and millet can be grown in limited quantities. At higher elevations these crops recede, and buckwheat, barley, wheat, radishes and potatoes provide the staple food.

There is some correlation between vegetation and ethnic groups. Though Thakuris have adapted themselves in many ways to the life in high country and do not differ greatly from Bhotias in so far as house-types, agricultural implements, methods of animal husbandry and trade patterns are concerned, they have settled only in localities where at least some rice can be grown in sheltered places. Thus at Dharapari in the upper Humla valley, the last Thakuri village on the periphery of the area inhabited exclusively by Bhotias, there are some rice-fields at an altitude of 8,000 feet. When I saw them in the last days of October snow had fallen on the still standing paddy, but the damage done did not seem to be catastrophic and as soon as the snow had melted the rice harvest continued.

Upstream from Dharapari rice cultivation ceases and in the area known as Panchsati or Satikhole, which lies on the left bank of the Humla Karnali and includes the villages of Yakba, Tangen, upper and lower Dhinga, Chyaduki and Kermi, various millets, buckwheat, barley and wheat dominate the agricultural scene. Cultivation extends here over two levels. On the relatively lower-lying fields two crops per year are grown, but on higher ground there is only one cultivating season, and buckwheat and oilseeds are the main crops. A similar situation prevails on the opposite side of the valley, where Khangalgaon and Jad Kholchi are the main settlements of an area known as Syandaphale. This is a name which refers to the shady character of north-looking slopes overshadowed for much of the day by the high range rising above the villages. The slopes on both sides of the Humla Karnali carry still a good deal of forest, and this offers scope for a type of slash-and-burn



cultivation rare in most other parts of Nepal. This method of shifting cultivation involves the felling of forest and the sowing mainly of buckwheat on the new clearings. The first year the soil is dug up with hoes, and ploughing begins only in the second year. After two or three years the plots are abandoned and left fallow for ten to twelve years. During that period the land reverts to forest.

The annual cultivation cycle in this area conforms roughly to the following pattern:

Preparation of the land for the summer crops begins in March/April with the ploughing of those lower fields which have been lying fallow during the winter. On the higher slopes some new fields are being carved out of the forest. The ploughing is followed by the sowing of millets (*kodu* and *chino*), amaranth (*marse*) and buckwheat, and by the planting of potatoes and radishes. In June the winter barley growing on the lower fields is reaped. Immediately after the harvest of this crop, the land is ploughed up again and buckwheat and *chino* millet are sown as summer crops. The only agricultural work in July and August is weeding. The early sown buckwheat ripens in September/October both on the higher and lower fields. It is harvested and threshed, and in October/November the reaped fields are wherever possible irrigated and manured. Both 'naked' barley (*ua*) and 'covered' barley (*jau*) are then broadcast and *after* the sowing the fields are ploughed up. In contrast to the Bhotias of Karan, who plough with one small bullock, the people of Humla plough usually with two *dzo*. An exception is the village of Chala, where the plough is drawn by either two or one *dzo*. There is virtually no agricultural work from December to February when the fields are normally covered with snow. In March the barley is weeded, and after this the new cycle begins.

Any freak weather can seriously disturb this carefully balanced pattern. In October 1972 for instance, there was an unseasonably early snow-fall with the effect that the people of Khangalgaon lost most of their buckwheat crop on the plots carved from the forest on certain shady slopes. I was told that there the snow would remain until the spring, whereas the sunny slopes on the south-facing slopes of villages such as Kermi were free of snow after a few days. In Humla there is a widespread belief that within the last twenty or thirty years there have been climatic changes which have adversely

affected the yield of the land. It is not possible to say whether this belief is based on facts, or whether it results from an attempt to rationalize a shortage of grain caused by the increase of the population and the decline of the trans-Himalayan trade. In the absence of statistical data it is equally difficult to discover to what an extent the villagers of the Panchsati group are self-sufficient for grain. As most householders are engaged in trade and consume some of the rice bartered in the middle-ranges while they export both rice and home-grown barley to Tibet, they are themselves uncertain whether they could subsist on home grown grain if both imports of rice and exports of barley ceased. In 1972 I was told in Kermi that of the thirty households thirteen had to borrow grain from neighbours in April or May, and that such loans were usually repaid after the harvest of the summer crops in October. My informant stated that when he was a child only two households were in that position. Though the number of houses had not increased, living standards had declined. Yet the people of Kermi believed that they were still better off than the Thakuris of Humla, who during recent food shortages had to borrow grain from some of the Bhotia villages. They explained their more fortunate position by saying that they enjoyed the protection of the Buddhist divinities, whose favour they gained by the performance of ritual and the burning of butter-lamps. The Thakuris who had neither lamas nor *gompa* lacked that supernatural support.

The agricultural pattern determined by the cultivation of summer as well as winter crops does not extend into the highest valleys of Humla. Neither at Yari nor in the Limi valley is it possible to grow winter-barley, and in both these regions the cultivating season is so short that only summer crops can be raised. The calendar of agricultural activities is thus very simple. They begin in early April, when the people of Yari scatter a thin layer of earth on the snow then still covering their fields. This is supposed to hasten the melting of the snow. As soon as the snow has disappeared the fields are manured. Different methods are employed for the sowing of wheat and the sowing of buckwheat and oil-seed. Wheat is broadcast and immediately ploughed in with an iron-tipped plough drawn by two *dzo* or two yak. In the sowing of buckwheat, oil-seed (*thori*) and radishes these two processes are reversed. The soil is first ploughed and irrigated, and only then is

the seed broadcast. After this has been done the field is ploughed once more. Irrigation continues in July and August, when the crops have also to be weeded. The harvest of all grain-crops begins in October and is completed before the end of the month when the crops are threshed by teams of several yak driven round and round the threshing floor on which the ears are spread out. The animals are harnessed together and hitched to a central post; a horse is often added to the team in such a way that it walks at the outside of the circle and speeds up the movement.

The use of ploughs with a share tipped with iron is confined to the villages closest to Tibet. In the past the iron for the plough-shares came exclusively from Tibet but recently the Chinese stopped the export of iron from Tibet. There is no obvious explanation for the absence of iron-tipped ploughs in all the other villages of Humla as well as in large parts of Jumla. Difficulties of obtaining iron in past ages might have set up a pattern which later became traditional, but in view of the active trading activities of a large proportion of the population the procurement of iron should have been relatively easy, and iron forms, after all, part of several other agricultural implements.

In the regions of high altitude where only one crop can be grown, the production of grain definitely does not meet the requirements of the population. The deficit has to be made up by trade, and the way in which this is achieved will be discussed presently.

Nearly all the cultivated land in Humla is individually owned, and in this respect there is little difference between the various communities. Most villages have in addition some common land used for grazing as well as forests which are traditionally village property. It is, however, possible to convert parts of common land to private property. A villager short of land may make a plot of grazing land arable, usually by terracing, provided he obtains the consent of the village-community. Similarly individuals may clear parts of the commonly owned forest for the purpose of cultivation. Some of the high pastures above the tree-line are used by the inhabitants of several villages, and such common ownership parallels similar arrangements among the Sherpas described in Chapter 2.

Nowadays revenue has to be paid for all land used for cultivation and the conversion of common land for the agricultural use of individuals must – at least theoretically – be reported to the

revenue authorities. The village-community is jointly responsible for the revenue of a holding whose owner has died without heirs. Such land may be distributed among needy villagers, and those who get the various fields henceforth pay the revenue.

Humla is one of the regions of Nepal where there is as yet no acute shortage of land, but as much of the arable acreage is marginal there is only limited scope for expansion of cultivation, and the population could not increase agricultural production to any great extent if the income from other sources should decline as a result of a shift in trading patterns.

### *Animal husbandry*

The raising of livestock is an essential facet of the economy of all inhabitants of Humla, and its importance increases in proportion to the altitude of settlements and the diminishing agricultural production. In lower Humla common cattle and buffaloes are kept in limited numbers as an adjunct to the farming economy, and though in some villages there are also a few sheep and goats large flocks of these animals are exceptional. As one moves from the communities of high-caste Hindus in the lower valleys to the regions where Byansis have settled and intermixed with Matwali Chetris one encounters a few *dzo*, and these cross-breeds between yak and cows increase in number with the gain in altitude. Sheep and goats too become more numerous as the height of settlements exceeds 10,000 feet. The breeding of yak also begins at this elevation and it is significant that yak are kept almost exclusively by Bhotias. While in many other aspects Thakuris and Chetris have adapted their style of life to that of the neighbouring Bhotia populations, nowhere have they taken up the breeding of yak or even the use of these animals as means of transport. That purpose is well served by *dzo*, and such cross-breeds can always be obtained from Bhotia breeders. Whereas neither the Chetris of Simikot nor the Thakuris of Daragaon own any yak the Bhotias of the neighbouring villages of Yakba and Dhingra keep and breed yak in the tradition of true pastoralists.

The herding of yak involves inevitably seasonal moves to high pastures of at least part of the population. This is facilitated by the possession of alternative houses within easy reach of grazing

grounds above the tree-line, but we have seen that not all communities breeding yak possess subsidiary settlements and that Bhotias of villages such as Kermi spend several months in tents.

Yak are bred not only for the sake of their milk and meat, and their carrying capacity in high and rugged country but also for the production of the hybrids resulting from the crossing with common cattle. Such hybrids, both male and female, command high prices among the Bhotias' Hindu neighbours, and the breeders themselves use the males as pack-animals and for ploughing, and value the females for their relatively high milk yield. For the purpose of producing *dzo* all Bhotia communities keep a few *kirkoo* bulls, locally known as *lulu*, and these they cross with their yak cows. The issue of female hybrids and *lulu* bulls are known as *tolba* (male) and *tolbini* (female). These are of relatively little value and are kept only in small numbers.

Unlike the Sherpas and the pastoralists of Dolpo who concentrate traditionally mainly in the breeding of yak, the Bhotias of Humla pay equal, and in many cases greater attention to the raising of sheep and goats. For these are of vital importance as the only pack-animals capable of negotiating the routes to the middle-ranges and even the Terai. Without pack-sheep and goats the salt- and grain-trade on which the Bhotias depend would inevitably come to a halt, and only the owners of sizeable flocks of sheep or goats can contemplate engaging in the profitable trade with the people of the middle and lower regions of Nepal.

The breed of sheep common in Humla and known in Tibetan as *rong-lu* ('low country sheep') is characterized by coarse wool suitable only for the weaving of blankets. Such sheep have the advantage, however, of being able to stand the cold of the high passes on journeys to Tibet as well as the warm climate of the lowlands. The Tibetan sheep *chiang-lu* ('northern sheep') have much finer wool, but do not stand the heat of the lower regions of Nepal. Hence they cannot be used as pack-animals for the trade inside Nepal. The people of Yari and Limi breed *chiang-lu*, but do not take them lower down than the trade-marts of Dzinga and Yalbang. There is a similar distinction between the breeds of goats kept in Tibet and Nepal. In Yari there are hybrids between the two types of sheep, but such crosses known as *shiaktsa* are not

considered particularly desirable because even the hybrids are allergic to the relatively warm climate of the middle-ranges.

The people of Limi used to have large herds of *chiang-lu* which in the winter, when Limi is under heavy snow, they took to the plains of Tibet. There the wind blows away the light snow covering the pastures, and sheep and yak feed on the dried grass. The Chinese still allow the Limi people to enter Tibet with their herds but restrict their movements to the valleys near the border and do not give them access to their former winter grazing ground. On one occasion large herds of yak and sheep belonging to Limi people were caught in deep snow near the border, and unable to move further into Tibet many of the animals died of starvation. Thus the Bhotias of Limi suffered misfortunes similar to those experienced by the people of Dolpo when the Chinese authorities prevented them from using their traditional grazing grounds inside Tibet (see p. 176). It seems, however, that the Limi people have somehow adjusted themselves to the new situation and that the breeding of yak and sheep is still one of the mainstays of their economy. In 1972 I was told that they sell annually 200-250 yak as well as some sheep to people of Mugu. The latter reach Limi by a high route which runs more or less along the frontier via Talung and Ning Khola. They pay for the yak either in cash or in such goods as cloth. Previously the Mugu people bought yak mainly from Drokpas in Tibet, and the switch of their purchasing operations is one of the many changes brought about by the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

## *Trade*

The whole of upper Humla is dependent on trade, and it is the recent changes in the trade pattern caused by external factors which threaten the prosperity of the entire region. The people of Humla are painfully aware of the gradual shrinking of their economic base, but neither they themselves nor the administrators concerned about their future can see a solution to the problems resulting from the reorientation of trade both in Tibet and in the lower regions of Nepal.

The collapse of the vital salt-trade, though clearly foreseeable as a likely development, is not yet imminent, and the activities of the traditional operators can still be observed both in Humla and

along the trade-routes to the south. In the following pages I shall trace the various stages in this trade in some detail, and though a full analysis of the complex system of travel and barter would have to draw on evidence from an area more extensive than the regions I was able to survey, its main features are illustrated by the case-histories recorded in Humla.

The basic elements of the exchange of Nepalese grain for Tibetan salt are simple, but the marketing of the two commodities is complicated by the number of agents involved, by the variety of the means of transport and the routes used, and by the fluctuations in the rates of exchange. An account of the trade as it existed within the memory of the present generation and as, in a somewhat restricted form, it still continues will conveniently begin at the Tibetan end of the series of barter-deals.

The source of all the salt which ultimately finds its way to Humla is the salt-lakes north of Taklakot. Traditionally Drokpas travelling with caravans of yak collected the salt and brought it to the villages in the vicinity of Taklakot. Until the Chinese occupation of Tibet some people of Limi also travelled with their sheep and yak as far as the lakes, and there loaded their animals with salt after paying a tax to local Tibetan officials. Now they are no longer permitted to do this, and have to purchase salt in Taklakot.

Drokpas normally did not carry salt across the passes into Nepal, but the settled villagers of the Taklakot region, locally known as Purangbas, not only bought and stored salt for sale to Nepali traders, but often also carried supplies of salt into Nepal and sold it in the villages close to the border and at trade-marts, specifically designed for such exchanges.

While in most other sectors of the frontier between Nepal and China, such as Walongchung and Khumbu, Tibetan traders are no longer able to cross the border, Purangbas are allowed to leave Tibet and travel with caravans of pack-sheep to Nepal. This relaxation of earlier restrictions on the part of the Chinese occurred after several years when the border was closed to Tibetan traders, and even Nepalese could obtain and export only small quantities of Tibetan salt. Since then the situation has changed. In the autumn of 1972 I met a group of nine Purangbas from the village of Lokba, which lies near Kojernath and Kangdzu. They had come to Yari with some 360 sheep and goats carrying salt as well as provisions

and cooking utensils for the journey. The older men wore traditional Tibet clothes and fur-lined hats, but the young Purangbas wore clothes cut in modern Chinese fashion, had their hair shaved and wore peaked caps. All these Purangbas wore Mao buttons just as many of the Bhotias of Yari with whom they traded wore King Mahendra buttons. They had many friends and some kinsmen in Yari, and they did not avoid contact with Tibetans who had left China and lived as refugees in Nepalese territory.

After unloading their sheep and goats, they stacked the bags of salt in the house of a friend, and then set about selling the salt. They expected to exchange it at the rate of 4-6 units of salt for 1 of rice, 2-3 of salt for one of wheat or *ua*-barley, and 1 of salt for 1 of *jau*-barley. Individual Purangbas also brought some Chinese cigarettes and matches and these they sold for cash, accepting Nepalese rupees. They told me that they would do a second trip a few weeks later and attend the Yalbang *mela*, an annual trade-mart at a village two days' journey downhill from Yari. There they would dispose of any salt left unsold at Yari, and also sell tea, cigarettes, shoes and cloth, all of Chinese manufacture. In this way they would obtain cash which they would use to buy butter. By the time I left Yari the Purangbas had sold 40 loads (*lukal*) of salt at a rate of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  units of salt for 1 of wheat, 2 of salt for 1 of buckwheat flour, and 3 of salt for 1 of *chino* millet. The Yari people who exchanged their wheat at this rate were those who in that year had not been able to undertake the journey to Tibet. While in October the Purangbas come with sheep and goats to Yari, they told me that they would travel to Yalbang with yak because yak could negotiate the Nara pass even when the track was covered by a moderate amount of snow.

The arrival of a caravan of Purangbas during my short stay in Yari was concrete proof of the resumption of bilateral trade between the people on both sides of the frontier, but I was unable to ascertain either the volume or the value of the goods brought by Purangbas to Humla. Although there is a customs post at Yari and properly kept records should have contained such data, the customs officials recorded only the sums levied as import duty, without noting the nationality of traders who paid the customs fees. Purangbas have to pay five times the import duty levied from Nepalese; they are charged R1 per 20 loads of salt brought in while Nepalese



traders have to pay R1 for 100 loads of salt imported. Between June and October 1972 a total of R3,500 was collected as import duty, but the records did not contain any reference to the citizenship of those who had paid it or the quantity of salt imported.

The salt and other Tibetan goods brought by Purangbas forms now only a small part of the total trade of the people of Yari. Unlike the Bhotias of the villages lying further south and at a lesser elevation, the Yari people spend most of the year in their own village, and do not move to the middle-ranges during the cold season. From the end of May until snow blocks the Nara pass, which normally is open until December, they make several journeys to Taklakot, where they sell grain and buy salt, wool, sheep, Chinese cloth, matches and cigarettes. For the transport of these goods they use mainly yak, *dzo* and horses, and to a lesser extent also sheep. While there are about 250 yak and 30 *dzo* in Yari, the number of sheep is only about 100, and these are partly *chiang-lu* and partly *rong-lu*. They take mainly their own wheat (*naphal*), buckwheat and oil to Taklakot and there exchange these goods not only for salt, but occasionally also for *ua*-barley grown in the vicinity of Taklakot. The wool they bring from Taklakot is used entirely in Yari for spinning and weaving, but much of the salt is intended for resale to people from lower Humla villages, who regularly come to Yari bringing wheat, barley and rice.

Yari is not self-sufficient in grain-crops. Even in good years there is a small grain deficit, which is covered by grain supplied by lower Humla. The Yari people pay for this not only in Tibetan salt, but also by the sale of livestock. They breed *dzo* and sell them to Purangbas as well as to Byansis and to Hindu villages of lower Humla north of the Margor pass, such as Thali and Ripa. To these villages they sell them usually as calves aged six to twelve months, but to Purangbas they sell only full-grown animals. The Chinese authorities allow the Purangbas to pay for livestock in cash, but the buyer must obtain a permit from his village council, for without such an authorization the Chinese currency cannot be used for purchases in the trade depots of Taklakot.

Many Yari people frequent the marts at Yalbang, Saina and Chala (see p. 256), and there barter salt for grain and occasionally butter. The purchase of butter by such yak-herding communities as Yari and Limi may seem surprising. It is a fact, however, that

their consumption of butter in tea and its ritual use in butter-lamps exceeds production. The shortfall has to be made up by the purchase of butter from villagers of lower Humla, who do not drink Tibetan tea and – not being Buddhists – do not burn butter-lamps.

Though Yari, lying at an elevation of about 13,000 feet is one of the highest of the Humla villages, the inhabitants appear relatively prosperous, and only a few families have to seek outside seasonal work. Between November and April, when Yari is under snow a few men and women go to such villages as Ripa, Thali and Gothi in Lower Humla, or more rarely to villages in the Acham region, and maintain themselves by casual labour.

In addition to its original population Yari has now a number of Purangba residents, who came from Tibet as refugees and settled in the village nearest to their former homes. There are twelve lay-families and eight lamas among these Purangbas. Neither have as yet built or rented homes of their own, but they live in the houses of Yari friends or kinsmen. The laymen have bought some land and they own yak and *dzo* which they brought with them from Tibet and now use for breeding. The lamas do not own fields or livestock, but they do a little trade with the money they receive as fees for performing religious rites. As these Purangbas cannot go to Tibet their trading is limited. They sometimes go as far south as Kermi, but unlike other Yari people never visit villages in the Acham region.

Yari belongs to a group of villages known as Satthapale, which includes also Tumikot, Munchu, Yangar, Yalbang and Chala. The latter, dominating the trade-route towards Bajura, Bajang and Acham, has a special position which will be discussed separately, but the remaining villages of Satthapale have much in common. They are not self-sufficient in grain, but can meet their requirements by trade with Tibet and the people of lower Humla. Many men go to Taklakot about six or seven times a year and barter grain for salt and wool. For carrying their goods they use yak, *dzo* and horses, but they have only limited numbers of sheep and goats, and hence lack suitable transport for large-scale trading journeys to the middle-ranges. They rely therefore mainly on barter with people from lower regions who come to Satthapale and particularly to the Yalbang mart to exchange grain for salt.

The fair at Yalbang, locally referred to as *mela*, is held on a large stretch of level ground on the left bank of the Humla Karnali where there is ample space for the camps of hundreds of traders and their animals. It begins in the middle of November and lasts for twenty to thirty days. People come there from Tibet, from Limi and from the villages of lower Humla north of the Chankheli pass. Purangbas stay at the fair until they have sold their goods and made their purchases, but people from other villages come and go. In 1972 about 100 Purangbas were expected, but unusually early snowfalls may have interfered with their plans. Traditionally men of Yalbang, known as *laiba*, were assisting in the transactions, weighing and measuring the salt, grain and wool. For this service they received 5 per cent of the grain sold by the Humlis, but they did not make any charge to the Purangbas. Nowadays policemen have taken over the supervision of the fair, and the rôle of the *laiba* has become obsolete.

Grain and salt are traditionally measured by volume, while butter and wool are usually weighed. The butter brought by people of lower Humla is either exchanged for wool or sold for cash. In 1972 the price of butter was R6 per lb and rice was exchanged for between two and four times the volume of salt while the exchange rate salt: wheat/barley fluctuated between 2:1 and 1:1.

The rates then prevailing at Taklakot were also subject to fluctuations, and there was the added complication that the Chinese insisted on weighing rather than measuring the grain offered by the Humlis for sale, and paying in Chinese currency with which the traders could purchase salt from the state trading depot. The Humlis, not used to these transactions, were often confused about the rates of exchange, and their information on trading rates in Taklakot was not always consistent.

In 1972 rice seems to have fetched in Taklakot up to six times the volume of salt and wheat or barley up to four times that of salt. In Acham and other places in the middle-ranges the exchange rates were salt:rice 1:1 and salt:wheat/barley 1:2.

A comparison of these rates with the current rates at the Yalbang fair, explains the attraction of that fair for traders from both north and south. Purangbas get in Yalbang much larger quantities of grain for their salt than in Taklakot, and people of lower Humla not equipped to undertake the arduous journey to Tibet can sell

their grain in Yalbang at much more favourable rates than in places closer to their home villages.

Chala, a village counted as one of the Satthapale group, but isolated by a high range, often impassable after heavy snowfalls, used to occupy a key position in the local trading system. It controls the route from the Humla valley to the Saina Chaur, the site of a trade-mart, and thence to Bajura and Acham. According to a local tradition Chala was established relatively recently by two brothers of Pandara near Galwa, who considered the site suitable for a community acting as intermediary in the trade along the route between Acham and Taklakot. The Chala people are believed to have originally been Byansis, but they became assimilated to the Bhotias of Satthapale and now speak a dialect approximating that of the people of Munchu and Yalbang. Until some three years ago a trade fair bigger than that of Yalbang was held in October/November, and this fair lasted for nearly a month. Many Purangbas went there to trade with the Chala people as well as with men from the Acham region. Nowadays the attendance of Purangbas has fallen off and this is explained by the fact that the Chinese authorities have reorganized the system of agriculture in the Taklakot region. Previously the Purangbas could leave their villages immediately after the harvest and travel to Chala in October when the passes were normally open. Now they are required to plough their land and repair irrigation channels before they are permitted to set off on trading expeditions. Moreover there is now a greater emphasis on agriculture at the expense of trade. Before the coming of the Chinese one man in every Purangba family was engaged in trade most of the time, whereas now all villagers have to work on the land. Short trips to Yari seem to be possible even in October, but instead of going at that time to Chala, Purangbas now visit the Yalbang fair in November. By that time the route to Chala is invariably closed by snow.

Chala traders still go to Taklakot, but the range of the goods they can sell and buy has shrunk. Previously they could buy with Nepalese or Indian currency whatever they liked, but now they have to take grain or butter to obtain Chinese currency, and even with that they can purchase only a limited variety of goods. Surprisingly *ua*-barley can be bought in Taklakot with Chinese currency and I was told that the production of grain by Purangbas



Bhotia man of Yakba, Humla



The village and terraced fields of Kermi, Humla

has altogether increased, a fact which is not to the advantage of the Nepalese Traders.

Though Chala, a village of some thirty houses, has lost some of its trade, its economic position is still favourable despite its altitude of about 13,000 feet. The yield of the land is exceptionally good, and the villagers are virtually self-sufficient in so far as food is concerned. They own about 800 yak, some *dzo*, and about 1,000 sheep. They sell both female yak and sheep, and while they drink the milk of sheep, they sell yak-butter to Taklakot and such villages as Munchu and Yari. Because of their favourable food position, Chala people never go to the lower regions to work for wages, but sheep-owners take Tibetan salt to Acham, where they barter it for grain and graze their animals.

The pattern of trade in the villages of the Panchsati group, which includes Kermi, Chyaduki, Dhinga, Yakba and Tangen, differs from that of the Satthapale group mainly in the much greater range of seasonal movements. Journeys to the middle-ranges and the Terai form an integral part of their operations, and these involve invariably the use of carrier-sheep and goats which stay for the whole of the winter in the lower regions. Thus the men of these villages cover with their flocks the whole of the distance between Taklakot and the Terai, while traders of such villages as Yari or Yalbang confine themselves to journeys ranging from Taklakot to villages within Humla.

The annual movements of a man of Yakba will exemplify this pattern. Tungma Tsiring, a man of average means, owns 60 sheep, which during the rainy seasons are grazed on the pastures of Talung Khola. Leaving half of his flock there in the care of a brother, he went in early August with 1 horse and 30 sheep via Limi to Taklakot, carrying *ua*- and *jau*-barley. The journey took him fifteen days, and on reaching Taklakot he sold his barley to the Chinese trade-depot. The voucher he received there had to be cashed in another office, and with the Chinese currency he was given he bought 30 loads (*luka*) of salt and 7 *dharni* (about 35 lbs) of wool of equal value. The wool he loaded on his horse and the salt was carried by his sheep. He returned via Yari, where he had to pay Rs Nepalese customs duty. The return journey took nine days. He stored the salt in his house in Yakba and took the

sheep back to the pastures at Talung Khola. In November he and his son went with all his 60 sheep to the village of Kuchi in Acham. He took only 15 loads of salt with him, leaving the remaining 15 loads and all the wool at home for his domestic use. In Kuchi, where he has trade-partners among the local Chetris, he exchanged the salt at a rate of 1:1 for rice, which he stored, and at a rate of 1:2 for maize and millet, which he and his son needed for their food. He left his son in the area of Kuchi to graze half of the flock, and went himself with 30 carrier sheep to Golagath in the Terai, and there bought Indian salt for cash, paying R60 per sack equalling 7 sheep-loads (*lukal*) at about 30 lbs each. This salt he took to Kuchi and there exchanged it for rice. In early April he and his son returned to Yakba with all their sheep, carrying about 12 loads of rice for their domestic use. In this way two members of the household maintained themselves on grain bartered for salt for nearly six months, thus saving a corresponding portion of their home-produced grain and adding some 12 loads of rice to their store.

Not all sheep-owners of Yakba go themselves with their flocks to barter salt for grain in the middle-ranges. While I camped in Yakba in early October two middle-aged brothers married to a joint-wife, but having only daughters and no son, sent a hired Thakuri boy with fifty sheep carrying salt to Acham. His wage for the trip lasting some two months were R90 plus his food. He was also given a small tent and a blanket. Though he joined two Yakba men, who were taking their own sheep and salt to Acham, he was not only in charge of the animals but was also responsible for bartering the salt for rice. The exchange rate in Acham was then fairly constant and thus it was possible to entrust a hired man with the entire operation.

At that time of the year men with caravans of sheep and goats are setting out on the first of two trading trips to the middle-ranges. After bartering their salt for rice or other grain in the villages of trading friends, they return to their homes, only to start after a few days' rest on more extensive journeys which take them not only to such areas as Acham, Bajura and Bajang in the middle-ranges but also to the Terai. On these journeys not only pack-animals but also all ewes and small lambs are taken, for the move serves the



double purpose of bartering salt for grain, and of taking the entire flock for the winter to grazing grounds in the lower-lying country.

The long-distance trade with caravans of sheep and goats is not confined to the Bhotias of upper Humla, such as the people of Kermi, Yakba and DHINGA. Some of the Thakuris of nearby villages engage in precisely the same combination of pastoral and mercantile activities.

The case of Kul Bahadur Sahi Kalial of the village of Daragaon, who is a member of the district *panchayat* and one of the wealthiest men of his village may serve as an example. When I met him in October 1972 he described the schedule of that year's journeys and trade-deals: Late in May he set out from Daragaon with three herdsmen, 1 horse and 100 sheep, and went at first as far as Yangar. There he left 60 sheep looked after by one herdsman to graze on the nearby pastures, and went with 40 sheep and the rest of his party to Taklakot. Twelve of the sheep were loaded with *ua*-barley from his own fields, each carrying about 40 lbs, while the other sheep went without loads. In Taklakot he sold all the barley, and bought salt. The transaction involved Chinese currency and was no straight barter deal but the rate worked out at about 1 measure of barley for 3 of salt.

Kul Bahadur returned with all his 40 sheep carrying salt to Daragaon. He then took 20 sheep loads of salt to Ripa and Unapani, villages in lower Humla some two to three days' journey from Daragaon, and exchanged salt for *ua*-barley at the rate of 1:1. As barley is lighter than salt 15 sheep could carry the barley, and he bought additional barley for Rs 50 at a rate of Rs  $\frac{1}{2}$  per lb. He then went with the 20 sheep carrying barley to Yangar, where his herdsman was still grazing 60 sheep. He left there 8 loads of barley as provision for the herdsman. From Yangar he once more went to Taklakot with 12 sheep carrying barley and 28 sheep without loads. By now it was late July. In Taklakot he again converted barley to salt, and received 40 loads of salt. These he took straight to Daragaon and dumped all the 40 loads in his house. He now had a store of 60 loads. In the month of August he went once again to Taklakot, taking 10 sheep loads of his own newly reaped wheat, and sold it there at a rate of 1 unit of wheat to 3  $\frac{1}{2}$  of salt.

He brought all the 40 sheep carrying salt to Yangar, and let the sheep graze there for two weeks. In the month of September he sent his son to Yangar to fetch all the sheep, and bring them and the 40 loads of salt to Daragaon.

By now he had 100 loads of salt stored in his house. On the 4th October his son and one shepherd left Daragaon, with 40 sheep carrying salt, for Kunda Dara in Acham, and there the salt was to be exchanged for rice at the rate of 1:1. In addition they were to purchase approximately 10-12 loads of rice for cash, paying about R112. The son and the shepherd were expected to return to Daragaon in November, and as part of the rice would have been consumed on the journey some 40 loads would reach the house, and this amount was to be stored for domestic use.

Some three days after their return the son and three more herdsmen were to set out once again, taking with them 100 sheep of which 45 would be carrying salt. This time they were to go to Bajura where they have friends in the villages of Tuka and Papla. The journey to Bajura was expected to take one month, because not only strong, castrated carrier-sheep but also elderly ewes and young lambs were to be among the flock. In Bajura the salt was expected to be exchanged for rice at par, and the rice thus obtained was to be stored in the house of a friend. While the ewes and lambs were to stay near the villages of Tuka and Papla in the care of two shepherds, the son and one herdsman were to go with 40 sheep to Dangari or Rajapur in the Terai. There they would purchase Indian salt, paying some R25 for 1 sack equalling 7 sheep-loads. They would spend about R140 on this purchase and in February they were to return to Tuka and Papla, and there exchange the Indian salt for rice again at an approximate rate of 1:1. As the people in Bajura have no carrier-sheep or other pack-animals, they make use of Humlis to bring them salt, from whatever source. After completing this barter deal they would have about 80 sheep-loads of rice in Bajura. As they would take about two months over the return journey in order to give the sheep ample time for grazing, about half of that amount would be required to feed four men and one large dog. By the time they reach Daragaon in early April some 40 loads of rice would be left.

The cash required for this whole operation was obtained by selling rams to Byansis of Darchula, either in Bajura or earlier in the year in Taklakot. Byansis pay in Nepalese currency, even in Taklakot, where they go in the course of their widespread trading operations.

The very elaborate trading schedule of the Thakuris is remarkable for more than one reason. It shows that the combination of animal husbandry and trading necessitates almost continuous movement, determined by the need for pastures as much as by the far-flung distribution of markets. The movements of animals and goods are prescribed also by climatic factors and the closing of certain routes by snow during part of the year. Another conclusion is that members of high Hindu castes finding themselves in close proximity to Bhotia villages emulate the local pattern of trade and that at least in Humla it is not possible to associate the trans-Himalayan trade in salt and grain to the same extent with Bhotias or other Tibeto-Burman speaking Buddhists as it can legitimately be done in other parts of Nepal. Nor are the Thakuris the only traders among the Hindu castes of the region. In Chibro, a village on the right bank of the Humla Karnali not far from Simikot, there are households of Upadhyia Brahmans, Jaisis, Hamal Thakuris and Chetris who engage in trade. Five out of seven Upadhyia households trade with Taklakot and also with Acham, transporting grain and salt on *dzo* as well as on sheep. Two Hamal households own sheep and these travel to Taklakot and to Acham. Men who own no sheep go only to Taklakot to exchange grain for salt which they bring home carrying it on their backs. Two Chetri families travel with sheep, others with *dzo* and horses, and the rest carry all goods themselves.

The further downstream the villages lie, the less important is the rôle which trade plays in their economy. The Chetris of Thali, a village one day's journey below Chibro, still go with their sheep both to Taklakot and to Acham, where they exchange salt for rice and wheat, and graze their sheep during the winter months. But the Chetris of Unapani, a large village rich in rice-lands, never take their sheep and goats to Acham, but go once a year to Taklakot bartering their own grain for salt, which they use mainly domestically, though limited quantities may be sold to people from the

villages of the relatively nearby areas of Soru Dara and Galwa Dara.

The farmers inhabiting the lower Humla valley and the side valleys leading into it, can manage very well without owning pack-animals and engaging in long-distance trade. For traders from Panchsati and Barthapale regularly visit their villages, bringing salt and bartering it for locally grown grain. The rates in a village such as Unapani were in 1972 as follows: salt:rice 1:1, salt:wheat/*ua*-barley 1:1, and salt:millet (*eleusine coracana*) 1:1½. The people of Unapani neither buy wool nor do they use the wool of their own sheep for weaving. They purchase some woollen material from traders of upper Humla, and they weave cloth from yarn made of a wild growing fibre or use cotton yarn bought in the Terai.

While the villages lying on the route between the home of the main trading communities of upper Humla and the rich rice-growing districts of the middle-ranges are not very deeply involved in the salt/grain-trade, their land is nevertheless the corridor through which during the trading season a steady stream of carrier-sheep and goats moves in both directions. The volume of this trade became apparent when I travelled along this trade-route in November 1972. Then many caravans made up of men and pack-animals from upper Humla were returning from the winter's first trip to the main rice-growing areas, and they were interspersed by caravans of men, sheep and goats from the lower country carrying grain to be bartered for salt in places such as Yalbang and Yangar. At the same time large numbers of sheep and goats belonging to Bhotias of Panchsati and Barthapale, some carrying salt and others going empty, were on their way to the winter grazing grounds in the middle-ranges.

A brief enumeration of the caravans encountered within two days on the stretch from Chibro to Thali and thence to Unapani will give an idea of the nature of this traffic. Going downstream myself I obviously did not meet as many of the caravans moving in the same direction as caravans going upstream. Among the former were four men of Nimatang (Barthapale) with some 100 sheep, both carrying salt and without loads, which were going to Kunda Khola, a valley in Bajura. Another caravan of some 150

sheep and goats was from Burangsha in Barthapale and this was on its way to Raskot Dara. A third caravan consisting not only of men but also of four young women of Burangsha and some 150 sheep and goats, belonging to different families, was also heading south. In the opposite direction the following caravans were travelling: Chetris of Simikot with 80 sheep were returning from Bajura where they had bartered salt for rice at the rate of 1:1. They were followed by a large train of some 300 sheep and goats led by several groups of Chetris of Raskot. These men had been travelling for a long time. They had gone to Saina Chaur, the site of a seasonal mart south of the Sankha pass, in the expectation that men from Chala and other Satthapale villages would meet them there with supplies of salt to be bartered for grain. But the early snowfall had closed the passes and none of the villagers of the upper Humla valley could reach Saina Chaur. After waiting for two days the Raskot men had retraced their steps and had then crossed into lower Humla valley via the Munya pass, which was still open. They were now on their way to the Yalbang fair where they hoped to be able to dispose of the rice they were carrying. That rice was only half-husked, and hence known as *dakrel*, because after a late harvest they had lacked the time to pound it completely. As such rice is less valuable than fully pounded rice they expected to get at Yalbang a rice:salt exchange rate of only 2:3 or 4:5.

Yet another caravan of Chetris were from the lower Humla village of Thali who came with 50 goats carrying rice from the village of Jaira in Galwa Dara. Four years previously they had given the Jaira people salt on credit, and they now had received rice at the rate of 2 measures salt: 3 measures rice.

Another party were men of Dhinga, a village of the Panchsati group, who had been to Raskot with more than 100 sheep and had bartered salt for rice at the rate of 1:1, and salt for wheat at the rate of 4:5. They were followed almost immediately by a caravan of Bhotias of Khangalgaon, who had been to Kunda Khola with more than 200 sheep and goats, and were bringing rice and millet, bartered for salt at the respective rates of 1:1 and 1:2. Another group of Khangalgaon men had gone only as far as Rumkot. There they had met Raskot men carrying half-husked rice (*dakrel*), and had exchanged salt for *dakrel* at the rate of 1:1.

Though this was a relatively low rate, they concluded the bargain because it saved them a journey of several days to Raskot or other areas further south.

Travelling on the narrow paths, continuously ascending or descending flights of rocky steps, which even yak cannot negotiate one appreciates the strenuous nature of the work of the shepherds. They have to be constantly on the alert to prevent the animals from straying from the path, and to straighten or pick up those packs which have slipped. When two caravans meet on a narrow and difficult stretch, there is often confusion and both may come to a standstill. At every halt all the animals have to be unloaded and the packs stacked. The reloading is a tiresome and time-consuming business. Yet, caravans are on the move for days and weeks on end, and, trekking from Jumla south-westwards to Dailekh and Surkhet, one meets again and again herdsman and whole families from the upper reaches of both branches of the Karnali travelling with their sheep to the winter grazing grounds. Wherever they camp, be it only for a day, men spin and tease wool and women set up looms on which they weave blankets of the wool of their own sheep as well as cloth of the finer wool of *chiang-lu* obtained from Tibet.

Not all the sheep and goats driven to the lower ranges in November and December carry loads. Many are taken down only for the sake of the grazing available in the forests and broad open valleys of such areas as the vicinity of Surkhet. Without such winter pastures the Bhotias of Humla as well as Thakuris and Chetris of many high valleys could not maintain their flocks of carrier sheep and goats which are an essential factor in their trading system.

While at present the salt-trade still enables the majority of the people of upper Humla to supplement their agricultural production and make a reasonable living without having to seek employment in climatically more favoured areas, there is no gainsaying that the profits from this trade and with them their standard of living have been declining. Older men are very conscious of the changing time and look towards the future with apprehension. A man of Kermi, who claimed an age of seventy-four, told me that in his father's time salt was exchanged in Acham for twelve times the

quantity of grain, and that even in his own time 1:5 was the usual rate, while 1 measure of salt fetches now only 1 of rice, and sometimes 5 of salt have to be given for 4 of rice. This drop in the value of salt in the rice-growing areas of Nepal would be disastrous for the traders if the rate in Taklakot had remained the same as it used to be a generation ago. Then 1 measure of rice bought only about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  of salt, but with the shift of the ratio in Nepal, that rate has also changed, and nowadays it fluctuates between  $1:3\frac{1}{2}$  and 1:6. But, however much salt the Chinese are prepared to give for Nepalese grain, there is a limit below which its selling price in the grain-growing regions must not sink if the cumbersome transport on the backs of sheep and goats is to remain economic. The projected construction of motor-roads from the Terai into the middle-ranges of Western Nepal would make Indian salt so cheap and easily available that the market for Tibetan salt would collapse as it has done already in the Pokhara region. If this were to happen the people of Humla, Bhotias and Thakuris alike, would no longer be able to barter Tibetan salt for rice even at par, and what surplus of rice existed in areas such as Acham and Raskot would presumably find its way south along the new lines of communication.

Though such a development may not yet be imminent and the nature of terrain represents certainly formidable obstacles to road-building, the relations between the Bhotias of Humla and the Hindu villagers of the lower regions have already begun to change. The headman (*gebu*) of Kermi, a man aged sixty, spoke very illuminatingly about the changes in the quality of life which he has witnessed. He said that he himself had spent more than half of his life very pleasantly and that he had nothing to complain about, but that for the young people conditions were becoming very bleak. He explained that many of the links with his one-time friends and trading partners in Acham had already been severed. They were no longer coming to Kermi and he was seldom visiting their villages. Some five years previously he had gone to see one of his ceremonial friends in Acham, but he had been very disappointed. The pastures (*chaur*) where he used to graze his sheep had been transformed into cultivated land and much of the forest had been cut. Thus little grazing land is left in that region and the herdsmen have difficulties even in finding enough wood for their camp-fires which are habitually kept burning all night. Men of Barthapale

confirmed the general feeling that conditions have deteriorated for the Bhotias. They described graphically how in the old days they were welcomed in all the Hindu villages of the middle-ranges, when they arrived with their caravans carrying salt. 'Then we were treated like kings and asked into all the houses of people anxious to buy our salt. Nothing was too good for us. Now people treat us as "dirty Bhotias" and don't give us hospitality, even if they are still prepared to take some of our salt in exchange for grain.'

The obvious fact is that the monopoly of the Humlis has already been broken and that in various ways Indian salt is filtering into the middle-ranges.

Apart from their deep involvement in the conventional trade which ranges between Taklakot in the north and the market-towns on the Indo-Nepalese border, the Bhotias of Humla have even more far-flung contacts. Some of them travel every few years to places such as Kathmandu, Kalimpong, or Darjeeling. Often such journeys are combined with visits to centres of pilgrimage, and not only men but also women set out on journeys to distant places. Indeed it would seem that trade is not the main purpose of this type of travel. In Yakba, a relatively isolated village, which does not even lie on a major trade-route, I met several men and women, including young girls, who had been to Kalimpong. An example may demonstrate the financing of such journeys. In the winter of 1971 Punam Dorje and his wife left Yakba with Rs500 and four sheep which they sold in Rajapur for Rs100 each. From Nepalganj they went by train to Kalimpong and there bought cloth for their own use, and the wife bought some Tibetan boots. They returned from this journey in March 1972.

This mobility, typical of Bhotia populations, stands in striking contrast to the attitude of the local Chetris. In Simikot I found that most of the Chetri women had married within the village and had spent all their lives within the radius of about two hours walk. Many had never crossed either the Humla Karnali or the Dozam river, nor had they ever visited such Bhotia villages as Yakba or Kermi.

On the other hand, the Bhotias of Kermi have the reputation of being great travellers. The headman told me how in his youth he and eleven of his co-villagers went in three consecutive years on



pilgrimage to Benares, Gorakhpur and Kathmandu. Each year they spent about six months travelling, and returned for the rest of the time to their village. To raise the money they sold *dzo*, sheep and butter, and took silver rupees on their journeys. In Swayambunath and Bodhnath they 'burnt a thousand butter lamps', and thus gained great merit.

Wide-ranging travel has always been a Tibetan tradition, and the experience of foreign places gained on pilgrimage could undoubtedly be put to good use in the planning and establishment of trade links. Moreover, the skill of moving with poise and assurance in unfamiliar environments, a skill learnt in frequent travel, is one of the most useful qualifications in the make-up of a successful long-distance trader.

### *Customs posts and trade-routes*

In Chapter 6 we discussed the system of customs contracts responsible for the rise of the leading Thakali family to a position of dominance in the trade of the Kali Gandaki region. It would seem that in Humla, an area much further removed from the centres of governmental authority, the control over customs posts was never a source of great economic and political power. There is no memory of the auctioning of customs contracts, and the income from customs receipts appears to have always been modest. Local Bhotia tradition maintains that during the war between the Nepalese and the Tibetans in 1855-6 Bhotias of Panchsati acted as interpreters for the Gorkha army, and that later they were also helpful in the peace negotiations. When they were asked what reward they desired, they asked for the customs contract of the routes via Yari and via Limi. The request was granted and a system of customs contracts existed until the end of the Rana régime in 1951. But unlike the contracts of Thak Khola these contracts were not auctioned and were operated on a rota basis by the Panchsati villages of Yakba, Tangen, Dhinga, Chyaduki and Kermi. The customs houses were in Yari and at the Takche Chaur which lies north-east of Limi on the route to the Lapcha pass. The route to Tibet across that pass used to be much frequented, but has now lost in importance owing to the Chinese tendency to concentrate trade in Taklakot. The customs officials were called

*talba*, and there were three in Yari and two at Takche Chaur. Originally all five *talba* had to be from the same village but they held office only for one single season. They paid to government an annual lump sum of Rs 180, and this was delivered to the revenue office at Simikot. Whatever income remained was distributed among the households of the village which provided the customs officials in that particular year. The men who manned the customs posts got a somewhat larger share, but their income too was apparently very modest, and in no way comparable to the enormous profits of the Thakali customs contractors.

A different account of the history of the customs posts was given to me by an old Kalial Thakuri of Daragaon. According to him the customs contracts were originally granted to Thakuris of the village of Daragaon, Yangdzu, Karpel and Gothi as a reward for services rendered during the war against Tibet. He believed that subsequently the Thakuris sub-contracted the customs post at Takche Chaur to Bhotias of Panchsati, but retained those at Yari, Dozam and Nepka, and managed them in turn. The Thakuri and the Bhotia versions of the establishment of these customs posts are clearly contradictory, and in the absence of documentary evidence we can only conclude that over the years men of both communities were involved in the collection of customs duties, without however making great fortunes.

Apart from the customs posts established by government, there was also a system of local tolls levied by individual villages. Thus the Bhotias of Chala exacted a toll from those Thakuris and Chetris of Acham, Bajura and Bajang, who passed through their village when going to trade at the Yalbang fair. No such toll was collected from Bhotias of Humla who travelled via Chala on their way to Bajura or Bajang.

Special fees determined by the parties involved in trade deals were collected also at Takche Chaur. Thus Tibetan Drokpas who crossed the Lapcha pass to come to trade at the Takche Chaur fair had to pay customs duty, but people from Limi and the Humla villages had to pay fees to the *talba* only if they traded with Tibetan Drokpas. If, on the other hand, they traded with each other, no payment was exacted.

Today all special tolls have been abolished and the only customs post in Humla is the one at Yari, where government officials collect

both import and export duty. There is no post at Takche Chaur, presumably because the volume of traffic does not justify the expense.

The changed conditions in Tibet have led to the virtual abandonment of several trade-marts where traditionally Tibetans and Nepalese met to barter their produce. Thus there used to be considerable trade along a route following the valley of the Tankeh Khola, whose confluence with the Humla Karnali lies due west of Darma. People from the villages of Darma, Melcham, Nima, Diplang and Nepka used to go up the Tankeh Khola as far as the border of Tibet. At a place called Tankeh a seasonal mart was held in July/August, and this was frequented by Drokpas who exchanged salt and wool for grain. The market no longer takes place, but in August 1972 some men of Melcham still followed the Tankeh Khola route on their way to Tibet. They crossed the border and went to a village called Tamjang, where they bartered their grain with the Chinese for salt. The rates were slightly less favourable than those at Taklakot, but the saving in travel time was considerable. There are no Nepalese customs officials on that route and the traffic would seem to be confined to the inhabitants of a few villages in the Tankeh valley.

A similar route runs along the Dozam Khola, which joins the Humla Karnali near Simikot. Bhotias of Dozam village used to go along that route up to the Takhu pass, and after crossing the Takhu Lekh visited such Tibetan villages as Naphta, Chokpana and many others. There they used to buy salt, wool, sheep, horses, yak, goats and dogs. The Chinese authorities have now stopped this trade, and told the Dozam people to go instead to the trading depots at Taklakot.

### *Bhotia social structure*

The basic pattern of social relations among the Bhotias of Humla is similar to that of such Tibetan-speaking populations as the Sherpas and the people of Dolpo. Local variations, however, are significant enough to warrant a brief outline of the social system as we find it today in Humla.

The most striking peculiarity of this system, and one which distinguishes the Humla Bhotias quite clearly from Sherpas and

many other Bhotia communities of Nepal is their division into named clusters of villages of unequal status which affects the rules of intermarriage. Such locally determined status-distinctions are an unusual phenomenon among Tibetan-speaking Buddhists, though we have observed a similar situation among the Baragaonlis of Thak Khola (see p. 153). In Humla the groupings are as follows:

1. Satthapale comprising Yari, Tumkot, Munchu, Yangar, Yalbang and Chala.
2. Syandephale comprising Khangalgaon and Jadhkholchi.
3. Panchsati comprising Kermi, Chyaduki, Dhinga, Yakba and Tangen.
4. Barthapale comprising Buraungshe, Turpa, Nimatang and Baragaon.
5. Limi comprising Jil, Halji and Jang.

Membership of these groups sets certain limits to the choice of marriage partners, even though the individual groups are neither strictly endogamous nor exogamous. The people of the Panchsati group, for instance, marry mainly among themselves and with the two villages of the Syandephale group. They regard themselves as being of a status somewhat superior to that of Satthapale, Barthapale and Limi. For that reason they normally neither take wives from villages of those groups nor do they share drinking cups with the inhabitants. However, some girls of Kermi have married men of Chala, Yangar and Yalbang, even though no marriages occur in the reverse direction. Within the Satthapale group Yari, Yangar, Yalbang and Chala intermarry freely, but these villages do not favour marriages with Munchu and Tumkot, two villages which are regarded as being of lower status. Consequently people of Munchu and Tumkot marry mainly among themselves. One of the reasons given for their relatively low status is the occurrence of a number of marriages between members of these two villages and Dangali Khambas, a nomadic community of indeterminate status. I have also heard it said that the people of Munchu are believed to have immigrated only some 100 years ago from Taklakot, and that because of their unidentifiable origins their status is low.

People of the Limi region now marry only within the three villages of the group, but it is said that before the Chinese take-over of Tibet they sometimes also intermarried with Purangbas.

Similar the four villages of Barthapale form a closed endogamous unit, marriages being either within a single village or between inhabitants of two villages of the group.

While the delimitation of the clusters of villages is unambiguous there is much less clarity in regard to the named clans (*rhuba*) which exist in some village communities, but seem to be absent in others. Among the people of the Panchsati villages, the existence and nature of exogamous, patrilineal clans is not in doubt, and the clan-membership of every villager is generally known. Thus in Yakba there are five named-clans (Bhuyung, Darwar, Gasha, Tshowa and Tebu). Four of these clans occur also in DHINGA. In Kermi the clans of Teva and Darwar are represented, and there are in addition four other clans not found either in Yakba or in DHINGA. In most of the villages of the Satthapale group, on the other hand, inquiries about local *rhuba* met with varying responses. Some men mentioned such clans as Tshowa, Teva and Gyölgut as occurring in Yarang, but being absent in Yari, and in these villages I gained the impression that clan-names, even if occasionally used, are of little relevance for the regulation of social relations. Men of Panchsati villages with whom I was travelling confirmed this impression and maintained that 'in Yari and Limi people did not have proper *rhuba*.' They explained this by saying that the inhabitants of these villages had immigrated from various parts of Tibet, and lacked therefore a clan organization like that of the older settlers of Panchsati. According to these informants Purangbas too are without named *rhuba*, though for purposes of marriage regulation they take account of descent in the male line, and do not permit marriage between persons descended within three generations from a common ancestor. In this respect they resemble the rural population of many regions of Tibet where individuals are identified not by the membership of a named clan but by a house-name (*tong-ming*) or simply by their village of origin. House-names are found also in the villages of Barthapale, but my stay in that area was too brief to permit an adequate investigation of the link between house-names and specific lineages associated with a house-name.

Apart from the status distinctions between groups of villages mentioned above there is throughout the Bhotia society of Humla a division into ranked classes which parallels the hierarchic order

characteristic of rural society of Tibet. In Humla the three status-groups are known as Takbu, Yokbu and Gara. The overwhelming majority of Bhotias of Humla belongs to the highest of these classes, and the number of Yokbu and Gara households is small. Gara are traditionally blacksmiths and their low social status compares to that of the Kami, the untouchable blacksmiths of Nepali-speaking Hindu society. Similar groups of low status are found also in Tibet, where some of them are also blacksmiths. The relatively low status of Yokbu, however, is not due to a polluting occupation but is explained by their economic dependence on people of Takbu class. The latter are sometimes referred to as Lam-bong, 'those above the path', and Yokbu and Gara are lumped together as Lam-yok, 'those below the path'. The explanation for these terms is to be found in the custom according to which persons of Yokbu and Gara status have to make way for Takbu in any chance encounter, and stand below the path while their superiors pass by above them.

The Bhotias take these status differences for granted, and say: 'wherever the sun shines and men eat salt, there are class differences.' And commenting on the social revolution in Tibet they said: 'Since the Chinese came to Tibet the Yokbu and Gara are on top; previously they saluted us, now we have to salute them.'

In day-to-day behaviour the distinctions between Takbu and Yokbu are not apparent to the casual visitor to a Bhotia village of Humla. Both Yokbu and Gara may enter the houses of Takbu, and Yokbu even interdine with Takbu. In villages of the Panchsati group Gara do not eat with Takbu, their position being perhaps equated with that of the 'untouchable' Kami blacksmiths of the Nepali-speaking Hindu population, but in Limi, which follows Tibetan customs, Gara may even eat with people of higher status, though like Sherpas of *khamendeu* status they do not share the same drinking cup with Takbu and Yokbu.

Authority in a Bhotia village is traditionally vested in a hereditary headman, and the village elders (*armi-pharmi*). Until the recent establishment of government-sponsored *panchayats*, *gebu* and *armi-pharmi*, used to settle disputes and impose fines on offenders. The fine paid by the guilty party in a quarrel was used to buy beer (*chang*) and this was drunk by the *armi-pharmi* and the villagers. If

men of two villages were involved in a dispute the *gebu* and elders of both villages met and tried to reach a settlement. Only as a last resort would they appeal to a government court. The *gebu* had no right to the free labour of the villagers, but people used to help him voluntarily with the work on his land. In some villages there are two *gebu*, and at the time when they both acted as collectors of the land-revenue they cooperated in the same way as in some Sherpa villages two or more *pembu* were engaged in the collection of revenue. Nowadays the officials of the new government *panchayat* have taken over the tasks of the *gebu*.

In the villages of the Barthapale group the dignitaries corresponding to the *gebu* are known as *gadpu*, a term also meaning 'respected elderly man'. In Turpa village there are three *gadpu*, all hereditary. They collect the revenue in turn, and each of them works for one year. There the old system still prevails and whichever *gadpu* works in any particular year he receives a nominal fee of Rs from government.

A village official known as *lora* corresponds exactly to the *naua* in traditional Sherpa village society. He is appointed for a limited period by the villages and his main task is the protection of the growing crops against cattle-trespass. He has to fine the owners of cattle which have damaged the crops. The amount is decided by the village-elders and the fines are paid in grain at the end of the harvesting season. The *lora* is invariably a poor man who does not own many cattle and is hence relatively impartial. As recompense for his trouble he receives contributions of grain from all the householders of the village. If he accomplishes his task to the satisfaction of the other villagers he is reappointed, but if he is unsuccessful another villager is entrusted with the office of *lora*.

The position of *lora* is not necessarily a desirable one, and in Nimatang, a village of the Barthapale group, no local man could be found to take it on. In 1962 a Thakuri of Daragaon was acting as *lora*. He had taken on the position because the villagers paid him substantial fees in grain calculated according to the size of their land-holdings.

Involvement of Thakuris in the administration of Bhotia villages is not confined to the function of *lora*, and in the following section we shall discuss the authority wielded by certain Thakuris at greater length.

Whereas Bhotia villages such as Yakba, Dhinga and Kermi are homogeneous communities with a common tradition, there are others whose composition reflects a process of gradual agglomeration. Thus the Barthapale village of Nimatang consists of four quarters (*pai*). One of these, comprising seven houses, is believed to be the settlement of the original occupants of the site. Another *pai* consists of four households whose ancestors came nine or ten generations ago from Taklakot, and the third *pai* comprising five houses is inhabited by people supposed to have come from Tibet via Dozam nine generations ago. The fourth *pai* numbers eleven houses, whose owners trace their descent to settlers from the Humla villages of Rahadeo and Puchar, now inhabited by Bhyansis: these four *pai* are exogamous, and marriages are concluded within the village as well as with people of the three other Barthapale villages.

The marriage customs of the Bhotias of Humla do not differ greatly from those of Sherpas and other Bhotia groups. Polyandry is common and regarded with approval, and women enjoy a position of great independence. Marriage is normally virilocal, but in families lacking sons a daughter may be married to a man who joins her parental household as resident son-in-law (*makba*) with the right to inherit.

### *The position of Thakuris and Chetris*

The population of upper Humla consists not only of Bhotias, but also of substantial communities of Thakuris and Chetris. These Hindus are by no means recent settlers. According to their own traditions not contested by their Bhotia neighbours they have been occupying their villages and land for as many as twelve to thirteen generations. Indeed Nepali-speaking Hindus and Tibetan-speaking Buddhists have existed there in close proximity over very extended periods. Yet, they remain distinct communities with pronounced cultural and racial characteristics and a strong sense of ethnic identity. The maintenance of the distinction between the two communities is all the more remarkable as environmental factors forced Thakuris and Chetris to adjust themselves to the local ecological pattern. However much Thakuris and Bhotias differ in cultural traditions and domestic habits, they follow similar



economic pursuits, and content themselves with very similar material possessions.

In upper Humla there are substantial Thakuri communities in Daragaon, Tuling, Dharapari, Chaukhune, Hitan Kolchi, Lidekhe and Yangu. The majority of these Thakuris are of Kalial clan, and consider themselves as kinsmen of the Thakuris of such lower Humla villages as Karpel, Yangdzu, Gothi and Darma. They have the tradition of being descended from Thakuris who some twelve to thirteen generations ago migrated from the vicinity of Jumla to Darma. At that time rajas of Kalial clan were still ruling in Jumla. Some three to four generations ago several families of Chatyal clan from a village in Acham settled in Daragaon, but their descendants account for only 8 households in a Thakuri community of 100 houses.

The network of marriage relations extends over a very wide area. Thakuris of Humla intermarry with those of distant Jajarkot, Gum and many villages of Bajang and Bajura. In reply to my question how women from such relatively low-lying regions as Jajarkot adjusted themselves to the harsh climate of Humla, I was told that brides usually arrived in the months of April and May, and that by the next winter they had got used to the colder weather. The continuous influx of women from some of the historic strongholds of Thakuris and the resulting affinal relations with some of the most highly regarded Thakuri lineages must be important factors in the maintenance of orthodox Hindu customs in an area where Thakuri communities dovetail with Bhotia settlements.

Today many Thakuris are engaged in the salt/grain-trade with Tibet and the middle-ranges of Nepal, but some of my informants maintained that it was only during the past three or four generations that Thakuris took to trade, while previously they had concentrated on agriculture. At that time, they said, the population had been smaller, and the cultivated area as large as it is at present. Yields were higher than they are now and there was no need to supplement the locally raised food supply by bringing rice from the middle-ranges. Bhotias from Limi and other areas near the Tibetan border brought salt and wool to barter for the grain grown by Thakuris. Occasionally Thakuris went to the Yalbang fair to buy salt and wool for their domestic use but not for resale. It is

not clear whether at that time Thakuris did not own flocks of sheep and goats which had to be taken to the lowlands for winter-grazing, but if they were not yet engaged in long-distance trading there was certainly no need for large numbers of sheep which could not be fed on stores of dry fodder.

Nowadays most Thakuris go as far as Taklakot carrying grain on the backs of *dzo*, horses and sheep, and bringing back salt and wool. But only the owners of sheep and goats – in a community of 100 houses such as Daragaon there are 15–16 such householders – also go to trade in Acham. None of the Thakuris of Humla work for wages in the middle-ranges, but a few young men sometimes go to India in search of seasonal employment.

The Thakuris' economic status gives them no obvious advantage over their Bhotia neighbours, and we have seen that in years of bad harvests some Thakuris even have to borrow grain from their more affluent Bhotia neighbours (p. 246). Yet, in other respects Thakuris used to dominate, and to some extent still dominate, the Bhotias in their vicinity. In the three villages of Yakba, Tangen and Dhinga, which are exclusively inhabited by Bhotias, the positions of headmen were held by two local families, but about a generation ago the Bhotia headmen ceded their offices to two Thakuris of Daragaon. It is not clear what motivated this move, and the only explanation I could elicit was that the Bhotia *gebu* 'had been unable to control the villagers'. At present the Thakuri headmen collect the revenue, and the newly instituted *panchayat* which comprises Thakuri and Bhotia villages enables Thakuris to play a rôle in the local authority system.

In the Bhotia village of Kermi Thakuris of Daragaon and Dharapari seem to have exercised for some time a certain amount of control without holding any institutionalized position. I was told that 'in the old days' Thakuris came to Kermi whenever they heard of a dispute and involved themselves in its settlement. They were not called by the litigants, but came of their own accord. Although they had no legitimate authority conferred upon them by government, they imposed fines and used them for their own purposes. No one can say how they obtained this position, and my Kermi informants suggested that they acquired influence because Thakuris 'are clever and can speak well'. Their high-caste-status and good command of Nepali certainly gives Thakuris an advan-

tage in dealing with government officials most of whom are also high-caste Hindus.

The Thakuris themselves believe that in the times of the Kalial rajas they held *tāmrapatra*, i.e. copper-plates bestowing certain rights on the holder, and that after the defeat of the Kalial rulers by the Gorkha armies, the local Thakuris continued to exercise the authority they had once held by right. They reckon that the present generation is the seventh after the Gorkha conquest of Jumla.

Another local tradition, which cannot be confirmed by reference to available historical documents, tells of the defeat of a Bhotia chief residing in the present Thakuri village of Yangdzu at the hands of Kalial Thakuris. Alternatively it is said that the Thakuri raja Bisudaraj Saha, who came from Jumla, entered into a treaty with a Tibetan ruler known as Gyalden Chaiyang, and that according to the terms of that treaty no taxes were levied on exports to or imports from Tibet. The present Thakuris of Kalial clan believe that they are the fourteenth generation after Bisudaraj. In Yangdzu there are still the ruins of a durbar of a Kalial raja. It is said to have been a building of seven storeys and men now alive told me that in their childhood two storeys of the palace were still standing.

Thakuris from Yangdzung, Karpel and Daragaon used to come to the villages of Barthapale to participate in the settlement of disputes. They imposed fines and took by force anything of particular value, such as for instance piebald *dzo*, which Barthapale men happened to own. The situation was the same as in Kermi and the Thakuris seem to have imposed their authority without any statutory right.

There is reason to believe that the Thakuris of Humla reinforced their position by the services they rendered to the Nepalese government at the time of the war against Tibet in 1855. Thus an old man of Kalial clan of Daragaon spoke of the exploits of his grandfather Disamal Sahi during that war. Disamal Sahi used to trade in Taklakot, and before the outbreak of the war he was sent there to spy out the land. After his return he fought in the Nepalese army, and as did many other Thakuris of Humla. Their familiarity with Tibetans and the terrain was obviously of great value to the Nepalese forces, and it is believed that at the end of the war four Thakuri villages were granted the right to collect customs

duties. By manning the customs posts they may have become involved in competition with local Bhotias who according to their own tradition also acted as customs collectors. Otherwise there seem to have been few competitive elements in the relations between Thakuris and Bhotias.

Nepal offers many examples of ethnic and cultural groups merging and losing their identity in the areas of overlap. We have seen that the amorphous category of Matwali Chetris may well be the result of such a process (p. 235). The Thakuris and Bhotias of Humla, on the other hand, have retained their separateness, despite spatial proximity and social interaction extending over several centuries. Both groups categorize themselves as distinct from the other, and are recognized as such by other populations. While in an earlier context we have mentioned ethnic groups describing themselves as Chetris (p. 234) or as Gurungs (p. 152), while to outsiders they appear as Bhotias, no one in Humla has the slightest doubt about the ethnic identity of Thakuris and Bhotias.

Thakuris may live in houses very similar in construction to those of a neighbouring Bhotia village and wear clothes which at least in parts are similar to the corresponding garments of Bhotias, but these tangible elements of material culture in no way blur the difference between the two communities. Two principal factors setting them apart are language and religion. The Thakuris speak Nepali and have usually only a very limited knowledge of Tibetan while the Bhotias speak a Tibetan dialect though as a rule they are also fairly fluent in Nepali. Thakuris are orthodox Hindus served by Brahman family priests while the Bhotias are invariably Buddhists who employ lamas for the performance of both domestic and public rituals. There is little trace of the religious syncretism so characteristic of areas such as Thak Khola where the Thakalis vacillate between the observance of tribal, Buddhist and Hindu rituals.

The identification of the Thakuris as an ascriptive and exclusive group finds expression in their rigid endogamy which precludes any intermarriage with nearby Bhotias, while favouring alliances with caste-members living at distances of as much as three weeks' journey. My stay in Humla was too short to enable me to assess the frequency of occasional unsanctioned unions between local Thakuris and Bhotias, but neither in the recording of house-lists

nor in that of genealogies have I come across any recent concrete cases. However in Yangar, a Bhotia village, there is a family claiming descent from Thakuris of Chatyal clan. The members of the family are indistinguishable from Bhotias, and now intermarry with local Bhotias and Bhotias of neighbouring villages. I was unable to ascertain the circumstances which led a Chatyal Thakuri to settle in Yangar nor the number of generations which have since elapsed. In the nearby village of Yari I encountered persons who traced their descent from Chetris of Bista and Bhandari clan who had acquired Bhotia wives. But these men had not been members of local Chetri communities, but were from Kathmandu or other parts of Nepal and had come to Humla as soldiers or government officials. Their descendants had been absorbed in the local Bhotia population much in the same way as the Sherpas have absorbed the offspring of unions between Chetris and Sherpa women. It is not unlikely that a Chatyal man responsible for the existence of a family claiming Thakuri descent in Yangar was also an outsider from a distant part of Nepal and not the member of a local Thakuri community.

These cases of miscegenation are exceptions, and in general there is an effective bar on intermarriage between Thakuris, Chetris and Bhotias. As a result of this isolation the Thakuris are basically a biologically self-perpetuating unit and the same applies to the Bhotias. The Thakuris retain by and large the Europoid features of their ancestors who first settled in the regions and the Bhotias are generally of Mongoloid type. Hence there is a definite correlation between racial characteristics and cultural identity, a correlation which we do not find among such other communities of Humla as for instance the Byansis and some Matwali Chetris.

In a discussion of ethnic groups and boundaries Frederik Barth emphasized that 'ethnic groups only persist as significant units if they imply marked differences in behaviour, i.e. persisting cultural differences'.\* By this criterium Thakuris and Bhotias certainly appear as clearly defined ethnic groups. Despite the background of an almost identical natural environment and a very similar ecology, the groups evince almost diametrically opposed values and codes of behaviour. Thakuris follow the orthodox Hindu principle of judging actions according to a scale of purity and pollution.

\* F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Bergen-London 1969, pp. 15, 16.

All those men who have undergone the initiation rite which entitles them to the wearing of the sacred thread (*janai*), observe strict dietary rules avoiding the eating of beef, pork, chicken and eggs and the drinking of all types of alcoholic beverages, and do not accept cooked food from the hands of anyone of a status other than that of Brahmans and Thakuris. There are equally rigid rules restricting the freedom of action of women. Marriages are invariably arranged and the insistence on clan-exogamy limits courtship among the unmarried. For in villages such as Daragaon where more than 90 per cent of all households belong to the same clan, the majority of young men and girls stand in an agnatic relationship which precludes all sexual advances.

The general atmosphere in a Bhotia community is much more relaxed. Bhotias are free to drink fermented and distilled beverages, and no edible meat is scorned on grounds of a dietary taboo. Men and women of different class may freely eat and drink together, though there are some restrictions on the sharing of drinking cups. The relations between the sexes are of great permissiveness, and young people are free to form attachments and initiate marriages. Polyandry is common, and the dissolution of marriages easy.

There is an equal dichotomy in the sphere of religious belief and practice. As adherents of lamaistic Buddhism the Bhotias place great emphasis on the need to gain merit and attach much importance to the beneficial effect of ritual performances. Lamas play a vital rôle in community life, and the maintenance of lamas and *gompa* is considered a normal item of expenditure. Thakuris, on the other hand, do not maintain elaborate shrines in their villages, and Brahman priests, living at some distance, are called in only for the performance of rituals connected with the life-cycle and funeral rites. Some slight Buddhist influence is reflected by the existence of some *chorten* in Thakuri villages. These were erected by lamas, mainly from Tibet, but the villagers contributed to the cost of construction, and maintain them even though they recognize them as monuments connected with Buddhism rather than Hindu belief.

Mutual recognition of basic differences permits the coexistence of the two communities without major friction and with no attempt at proselytizing. The interference of Thakuris in the settlement of Bhotia disputes was an expression of the Thakuris' one-time political dominance, but the motives were basically mercenary and

Thakuris in no way aimed at imposing their own values on unwilling, or even receptive, Bhotias. Although the Bhotias of such villages as Kermi belong now to the same government-instituted *panchayat* as the Thakuris of Daragaon, Dharapari and Chaukuni they do not maintain purely social relations with the people of these neighbouring villages. They do not invite Thakuris to weddings, funerals, or temple feasts, and do not visit them except when there is business to be transacted. Such occasions are rare for there is little trade between Bhotias and Thakuris of the same region, their economies being similar and not complementary. Thakuris enter the houses of Bhotias and young men who do not yet wear a sacred thread may even eat rice offered by their Bhotia hosts. Having not undergone the thread ceremony (*brata bandha*) they are not subject to the rules of their caste, and it would seem that young Thakuris engaged in trade prolong that state as long as possible. This involves late marriage, for a wedding cannot be solemnized until the bridegroom has been invested with the sacred thread. The advantages of postponing the donning of the *janai* are great, however, for the observance of caste rules is inconvenient for those who move among non-Hindu populations and in regions of high altitude. Thus high-caste Hindus should take off their clothes and put on a clean loincloth when cooking and eating, but in temperatures many degrees below freezing point this is hardly practicable. Yet Thakuris set too much store on their high caste-status and above all on their marriage alliances with Thakuris of the middle-ranges even to contemplate dispensing with the sacred thread altogether. Some Chetris on the other hand have taken a more pragmatic attitude and have given up the wearing of a *janai*. Those of Thē village told me that their forefathers had come from Darakot in Kunda Khola and that there they had worn *janai*. But once settled in Thē they had to travel frequently to Tibet and stay in Bhotia villages and so they discontinued the custom of wearing a sacred thread, and thereby freed themselves from all the restrictions this involved.

The Chetris of such Humla villages as Simikot, Nalla and Thē have even less contact with Bhotias than Thakuris. Unlike the latter they have never interfered in the internal affairs of Bhotia communities, and their economy, running parallel to that of Bhotias, offers little scope for commercial transactions. The

Chetris with whom the Bhotias of Humla do have business relations are those living in the middle-ranges where the Humlis sell their salt and graze their sheep. Most of the Bhotia traders have ceremonial friends among the Chetris of such areas, and when they go to their houses they bring them gifts of salt or woollen cloth, and in return are fed for some days. Chetris from villages in Soru Dara and Galwa Dara, regions within easy reach of upper Humla sometimes come there to barter tobacco, mustard oil and home-woven cotton cloth, usually getting wool or salt in exchange. Those who have *mit* relationships with Bhotias are sure of a welcome and a roof, and there is no doubt that all traders set great store on such ceremonial friendships. As friends in distant places which have to be visited in the course of trade are more useful than those living in the intermediate vicinity, Bhotias have closer ties to individual Chetris in villages of the middle-ranges than to any of their Chetri neighbours in nearby villages of Humla. Hence there are few signs of any cultural interaction between the Chetris and the Bhotias of Humla, and the two communities coexist without consciously or unconsciously impinging on each other.

### *Byansis and Dangali Khambas*

The people of Humla are not the only traders to make their way to the entrepôt of Taklakot and to exchange goods carried across the Himalayan ranges for the salt and wool of Tibet. Members of another important trading community generally known as Byansis have an equally great stake in the trade converging on Taklakot. The larger part of their trade does not directly affect Humla, but some Byansis have settled in the valley of the Humla Karnali, and whenever one discusses with Humlis the trading network hinging on Taklakot the rôle of the Byansis is inevitably mentioned. The Byansis take their name from the valley of Byans which lies immediately west of the Indo-Nepalese border and south-west of the Lipu pass leading from Almora district to Taklakot. The position of the Byansis of that district and their trading relations with Tibetans has been described in detail by Ram P. Srivastava,\* and

\* cf. 'Tribe-caste Mobility in India and the case of the Kumaon Bhotias' in C. von Fürer-Haimendorf (Ed.) *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, Bombay 1966, pp. 161-212.



here it suffices to complete the picture by sketching the trading operations of those Byansis who live within the borders of Nepal. The permanent homes of these Nepalese Byansis are situated in such villages as Tinkar and Changru in Baitadi district. For the Byansis, who live on both sides of the Indo-Nepalese border, this political frontier has never been a reality, and they moved across it as easily as they were accustomed to move across the Indo-Tibetan border. Today all this has changed and ever since the outbreak of the Indo-Chinese conflict in 1962 only the Nepalese Byansis have been able to trade in Tibet. Until 1972 they traded mainly in Indian goods, for which there was a ready market in Taklakot, but of late the Chinese have proclaimed that only trade in Nepalese goods would be tolerated, and this restriction is likely to hamstring the Byansis' elaborate trading system.

Many of the Nepalese Byansis were in the habit of travelling in the winter to Delhi, Calcutta and Kalimpong, and to purchase there such goods as boots, cloth, cigarettes and watches. They brought these to Tinkar and Changru where they stored them until the next summer when they took them for sale to Taklakot. There they had accounts in the Chinese bank and while the principal merchants looked after the business transactions in Taklakot, their servants or other members of their family, travelling with horses and mules, made several trips to their home villages each time bringing additional goods to Taklakot. On the return journeys they took wool and Tibetan sheep, but only small quantities of salt, to Nepal. This traffic continued until early November, and by that time all their Indian goods had been sold. The wool and livestock brought from Tibet were mainly sold to Indians and with the cash received the Byansis went to Pithoragarh in Almora which lies on a motor-road, and there they bought Indian salt at a low price. Carrying this they then went to the Nepalese districts of Baitadi, Deoti, Acham, Bajang and Bajura, and sometimes even as far east as Soru Dara. The salt was exchanged for rice, and their sheep were grazed on the harvested fields and in forest areas. They stored the rice with friends for a short time during which they went to the Terai and there bought more salt and also some rice. The salt was sold in the middle-ranges, and the rice together with that already dumped, was carried to their home-villages.

The Byansis of Tinkar and Changru have a traditional link with

Humla. They claim that their forefathers dwelt at Nalla in the Karnali valley, and they still come there on pilgrimage to visit the shrine of the local god Loasu. The story goes that this god opposed their move to their present homes, and that at first they encountered many difficulties. When they come to Nalla they sacrifice sheep and goats to Loasu, and it is said they respect the Brahmans of the nearby village of Chirbo as the family priests of their ancestors. Not far from Nalla lie two villages inhabited by communities of Byansis, Syanda and Santa, and in lower Humla there are also several Byansi villages. I had no opportunity to study the inhabitants of these villages, but judging from the impression I gained while passing through the area, I am inclined to echo Srivastava's assessment of the Byansis of Almora. He classifies them as Bhotias with 'a preponderance of Mongoloid characters' (loc. cit. p. 177), and states that they are not Buddhists in any sense of the term, although the possibility of their having been so once . . . is not remote' (p. 174). Such Byansis as I encountered seemed to display an agglomeration of Buddhist and Hindu features comparable perhaps to that found among some of the Thakalis. Srivastava lays great stress on the fact that the Bhotias of Almora who include the Byansis, scored in the Tibetan trade over any Hindu competitors because they had no hesitation in entering into commensal relations with Tibetans, whereas high-caste Hindus shun Tibetans as 'beef eaters'. The same applies, no doubt, to the Byansis of Nepal, and though they may not be strict adherents of lamaist Buddhism, the Bhotias of Humla do not regard them as Hindus and give credence to the tradition that the people of Chala, now indistinguishable from other Bhotias of Humla, were originally Byansis. On the other hand, there are Byansis, such as some 100 households in Syanda, who have adopted such Chetri clan-names as Rokaya, and intermarry with Byansis of Rahadeo and Phuchar, communities also comprising clans with names encountered among many Matwali Chetris. The employment of lamas for funerals, however, is indicative of the Buddhist affiliations of these groups who seem to stand on the periphery of the sphere of Tibetan culture. Their language though not identical with that of the Humla Bhotias is said to be related to Tibetan but to have incorporated many Nepali words.

An ethnic group of equally ambiguous character are the Dangali

Khambas. They constitute a small community of some sixty families and are entirely nomadic. They have no settled homes and move between Acham, Humla and Taklakot. After spending the winter in Acham they come with caravans of carrier-sheep laden with cereals, to upper Humla, and from there go to trade in Taklakot. Later in the year, usually in June/July they bring all their families as well as cows and horses to Humla. While the sheep and cattle graze in the care of the owner, men go on further trading journeys to Taklakot and later also to Chala. The salt obtained in Taklakot or purchased in upper Humla they take to the trade-mart at Saina Chaur south of Chala, and there barter it for grain. Finally they move with all the grain collected and with their families and livestock to the middle-ranges where they spend the winter.

Dangali Khambas speak both Tibetan and Nepali, but it would seem that they have much closer affinities to the Humla Bhotias than to any Nepali-speaking population. In the Bhotia village of Munchu there are several families who have intermarried with Dangali Khambas, and when on my way to Yari I passed a camp of Dangali Khambas my Bhotia porters recruited in Munchu greeted them affectionately as close kinsmen.

As an entirely nomadic group the Dangali Khambas stand on the extreme end of a continuum comprising many diverse degrees of mobility and stability. In the vicinity of Jumla and of Gum there are other groups of Khambas, but though also highly mobile, these communities have attached themselves to localities where they now own houses and grow crops. The origin of these groups is still as problematic as is that of the Dangali Khambas, but there is nothing to suggest that they have any connection with the inhabitants of the Tibetan province of Kham, whose martial qualities found expression in their fierce resistance to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. There is no precise indication that any of the Khamba communities long established in Nepal entered the country in the course of similar political upheavals in Tibet, but the fluidity of populations in the Himalayan region does not exclude such a possibility.

## Trade and Social Relations

The dependence of the Bhotias of the Himalayan highlands on trade is neither of their own choosing nor is it the result of historic accident. A self-contained peasant economy based on agriculture and animal husbandry could not be sustained by the natural resources of valleys lying above 10,000 feet, and even below that level larger concentrations of populations could grow only where the income from trade supplements the yield of subsistence farming. Areas of extreme altitude such as Khumba, and the Dolpo higher regions of Humla and Limi might well have remained uninhabited or been visited only by herdsman taking their flocks for a few weeks to lush summer pastures had it not been that they lie in the interstices of two complementary economic zones. The Tibetans of the arid plateaux to the north are in need of the grain and many other products of the middle-ranges of Nepal, while they in turn are able to provide virtually unlimited quantities of salt as well as wool and certain types of livestock. Apart from being the natural channel for the exchange of these basic products of the zones extending to the north and to the south of the Himalayan main range, the passes on Nepal's border with Tibet also served the flow of trade in goods from the more distant lands of India and China – a trade which was of great importance before steamships began to ply between Calcutta and the Chinese ports.

Cast by geographical factors in the rôle of middlemen between the economies of two disparate but complementary zones, the high-altitude dwellers of the Nepal Himalayas reacted to the available commercial openings in a variety of ways. In the preceding chapters we have seen that there were communities such as the Lhomis of the upper Arun valley who confined their trading activities to a very limited barter of local produce for commodities destined for their own use and that of their immediate neighbours.

But such a minimal response to the opportunities inherent in the position on one of the routes to Tibet is exceptional, and many communities such as the Bhotias of Walongchung, the Sherpas of Namche Bazar, the Thakalis of Tukche, the Taralis of Tichurong, and the Bhotias of Humla and Mugu have developed trade as their central economic interest. Involvement in long-distance trade has determined the style of life of individuals and whole communities, and we have seen that any sudden change in the scope for such trade has a profound effect on an economic system built up over generations.

Anthropologists have long recognized that economic organization is closely correlated with social relations, and it is therefore appropriate to consider the extent to which the type of trade so far described presupposes or conditions certain types of social structure. In doing so we are immediately faced by the question whether the pursuance of trade as a central economic activity produces certain social attitudes and arrangements, or whether people motivated by a specific outlook on life are more likely to achieve success in trading than communities conditioned by a different ideology.

Before we consider this problem in the specific context of Himalayan trading communities, it will be well to look at the social coefficients of the commercial activities observed in the societies discussed in this volume.

Common to all of the Bhotia groups including the Sherpas is a social system which allows wide scope for individual choice both in economic activities and the ordering of social relations. Unlike the member of any of the Hindu castes of Nepal, the Sherpa is a free agent from a relatively early age. There is no obligation to, or control by, a joint family in which even adult sons with wives and children of their own are subject to the authority of an elderly head of the family. Among the Sherpas marriage coincides normally with the establishment of a separate household and every married son has the right to a share in the parental property. Hence he is free to engage in trading ventures even should his father have been more interested in cultivation or the building up of a large herd. The risks he takes are entirely his own for no kinsman is under an obligation to come to his rescue or liable to pay his debts should a venture fail. Even unmarried daughters still living under the

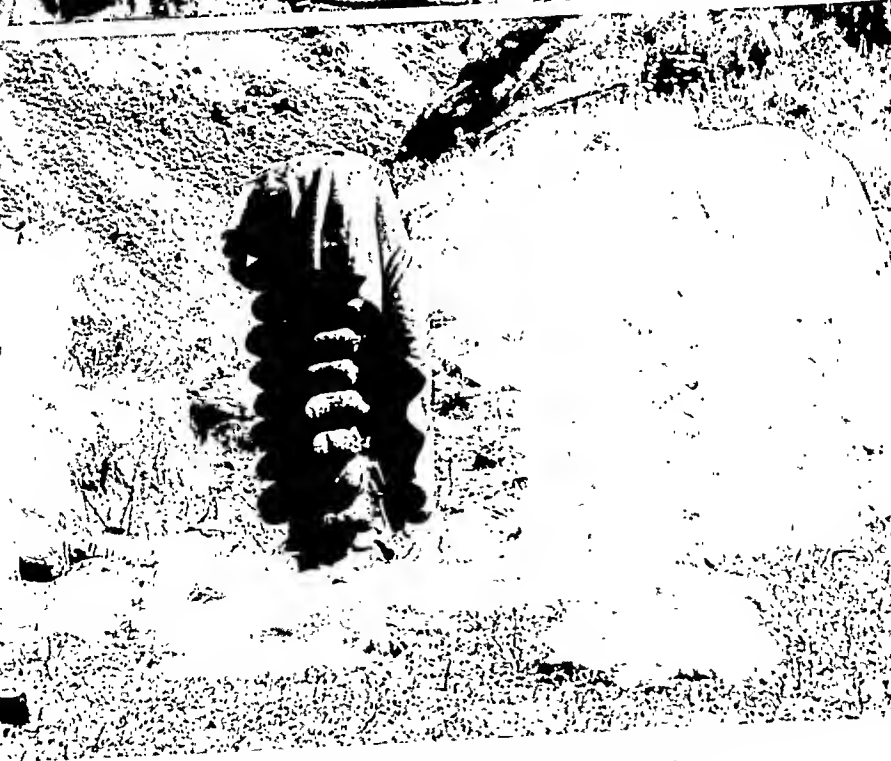
parental roof are encouraged to do some trading on their own, and many wives continue this practice and engage in business deals while their husbands are on major trading journeys. In the new situation of a growing tourist business which compels many Sherpa guides to spend months on end away from home, this traditional independence and business acumen of Sherpa women is a great asset. For a family's interests in the village would be gravely at risk were women not able to make decisions and run households and farms in their husband's absence.

Similarly Thakali women engage in a variety of business activities independently of their spouses. It has long been Thakali practice to leave the snow-bound villages of Thaksatsae and Panchgaon during the winter and move to the middle-ranges where the men pursue their trading interests while women set up temporary taverns serving beer, liquor and food to travellers and particularly to the many soldiers on leave from Indian and British Gurkha regiments. Thakali women run these wayside inns entirely on their own, and the traditional mores of their society permit them to mix freely with their male customers. The widespread suspicion that they are also accessible to sexual advances is in my opinion totally unfounded, the virtual absence of illegitimate children being proof of the Thakali girls' ability to avoid too great an involvement with their guests. Thakali husbands and wives vie with each other over the profits they make in their business activities and when at the end of the winter they return to their houses in Thak Khola the spouses try to outdo each other by proudly proclaiming their respective gains. Such a practice would be unimaginable in Nepalese Hindu society, which expects women to be submissive and severely restricts their interaction with men not belonging to the inner circle of their kin-group.

But it is not only women who profit from the freedom Buddhist societies allow both sexes. The Sherpa, Bhotia or Thakali man too enjoys a freedom from crippling restrictions which might impede relations with trading partners. Not bound by dietary taboos or the ban on interdining with persons classed as socially inferior, he can accept hospitality wherever he goes and entertain in his own house anyone whose custom may be economically advantageous. On his far-flung journeys he has not to confine himself to the type of food permitted by the rules of his caste, and can seek shelter wherever



Yak-pasture near Dzinga, Humla  
Sheep caravan in Humla



Loading goats with bags of salt in Munchu, Humla  
Leather bags containing salt piled up in a staging camp in Humla



convenient without having to fear pollution by persons of lower ritual status.

Anyone who has travelled in rural Nepal has experienced the difference in the attitudes of Buddhist and Hindu communities. In the former it is easy to gain entrance to houses and offers of hospitality are usually freely forthcoming while in Hindu villages no stranger is admitted to a private house and even his attempts to purchase victuals often meet with difficulties. Those Sherpas and Bhotias who travelled widely in Tibet were accustomed to a system of hospitality ideally suited to the needs of long-distance traders not only in need of shelter in an inclement climate but dependent for their business on relationships of personal trust established and strengthened by occasions for conviviality. They maintained this same tradition in their own houses and dispensed hospitality not only to further their business contacts but also as a means of building up their social prestige.

Sherpa society is basically egalitarian and though traces of an hierarchic order are observable among the Bhotias of Walongchung, Baragaon and Humla these communities too are free of any deep rifts between classes of different status. Similarly Thakalis form a homogeneous society preserving the ideal of the basic equality of all members despite a wide range in the wealth and political influence of individuals. The scope for mobility inherent in such systems favours the successful trader. A rapid rise in economic fortunes resulting from a few lucky business deals can lead to a corresponding increase in social status impossible to achieve within the more rigid framework of a Hindu caste society.

It is this mobility and the almost unlimited opportunities open to the energetic and talented individual which distinguishes a mercantile economy from an economic system based solely on agriculture. In an agricultural society resources are usually finite, for cultivation cannot be expanded beyond the limits of the available land, and this is certainly the case in the mountains of Nepal. The land-holding of any member of a community can thus be increased only at the expense of other villagers. The acquisition of wealth is usually a slow process, and no man born poor can hope to amass a fortune by his own efforts, though hard work and frugality may improve his position over a number of years. The field of activities open to the enterprising trader with a flair for

foreseeing fluctuations in the market, on the other hand, is boundless and modest fortunes can be made within a short span of time. The communities we have discussed in the preceding chapters exemplify this position. The wealthiest men are found where agricultural resources are minimal, and the need to concentrate on trade is greatest. The merchants of Walongchung, Namche Bazar and Tukche are all far richer than any of the inhabitants of neighbouring villages with more extensive land and better prospects for cultivation. Among the Taralis of Tichurong too it is the adventurous traders and not the careful cultivators who have acquired the greatest wealth.

Yet, there remains a problem to be solved. In the conduct of their trans-Himalayan trade Sherpas, Bhotias, Thakalis and Taralis alike have depended not only on the salt provided by their Tibetan partners but equally on the grain they bought from the cultivators of Nepal's middle-ranges be they Rais, Magars or Chetris. But these cultivators, exemplified by the Rais carrying baskets filled with rice to the weekly market of Namche Bazar, have remained a nameless crowd of small producers never aiming higher than the sale of the grain grown on their own land. Why, we may well ask are there no Rai merchants who buy up the rice of their village, and deal with the great traders of Namche Bazar on equal terms, and why have Chetri counterparts of the merchant princes of Tukche not monopolized the grain-trade in the lower Kali Gandaki valley? There is no clear answer to these questions, but it would seem that in agricultural communities which place a high premium on the ownership and acquisition of land there is little incentive to engage in the more risky business of commercial entrepreneurship. Moreover, high-caste Hindus, enmeshed in the net of family and caste obligations and bound by caste rules adding to the discomfort and hazard of travel outside their home ground, may well find the life of long-distance traders distasteful. Content with their simple houses and the adequate supply of locally grown food grain they do not hanker after the luxury and artistic embellishment found in the houses of the great trading families of such Buddhist communities as Sherpas, Bhotias of Walongchung or Thakalis of Tukche. Seeing merit above all in personal austerity and strict conformity to caste rules they lack the initiative which induces Bhotia traders to devote their wealth to the construction

of religious monuments, the endowment of monasteries and the acquisition of prestige by the conspicuous dispensation of hospitality and charity.

The situation in Humla which differs fundamentally from that prevailing in all other border areas may seem to raise some doubts in the validity of this hypothesis. For in Humla, Bhotias and Hindus of high caste dwell in close proximity in the same environment and there are no significant differences in their ecological background. Moreover many Thakuris and Chetris are as deeply involved in the salt/grain-trade as any of their Bhotia neighbours. They spend several months every year travelling with caravans of sheep and goats between the Tibetan trade-centre of Taklakot, the middle-ranges of Nepal and often even the Terai. Their skill in the breeding and management of their pack-animals is not inferior to that of the local Bhotias. Yet, one can argue that the Thakuris' adoption of the trading-pattern of their Bhotia neighbours does not necessarily invalidate the hypothesis that those operating within the Buddhist ideology and social system are more suited to the rôle of adventurous long-distance traders than those enmeshed in the net of Hindu caste rules. For neither the Bhotias nor the Hindus of Humla are true mercantile entrepreneurs comparable to the great Sherpa and Thakali merchants and perhaps some of the Byansis of Western Nepal and Almora. Though their trading pattern is fairly elaborate, it consists basically of a sequence of simple exchange transactions involving mainly cereals, salt and wool. Even when Tibet was still open to travelling traders neither the Bhotias nor the Thakuris and Chetris went much beyond Taklakot, and none of them ever made extensive trading expeditions into Tibet such as took many Sherpas to Lhasa, Shigatse and other towns. While the trade in salt, wool and grain enabled the people of Humla, both Buddhist and Hindu, to maintain a comfortable standard of living as long as Tibetan salt met with no competition throughout the middle-ranges of Nepal, it had never led to the amassing of great mercantile fortunes nor had it invested the operators with economic power equal to that wielded by the Thakali *subba* or by the rich traders of Walongchung and Solu.

Though Humla was once a vital link between the southern and the northern provinces of the ancient Malla kingdom which

comprised the whole of Jumla as well as Purang, it was for long a backwater of relatively primitive farmers and cattle-breeders. Their energetic trading activities did little more than make good the deficiencies in the local production of essential food supplies, and did not sustain cultural developments comparable to those which had sprung up along such major arteries of trade as the route leading through the Kali Gandaki valley. The *gompa* of Humla are modest by the standard of the religious architecture of Mustang and Thak Khola, and there are no elegant and richly furnished mansions on a level with those of wealthy Sherpa merchants.

While neither the Bhotias nor the Thakuris of Humla are traders in the same class as Sherpas and Thakalis, there is one other community in Nepal whose success in trading enterprises rivals that of the merchants of Namche Bazar, Solu, Walongchung and Thak Khola. The trade between the towns of the Kathmandu valley and Tibet was for centuries in the hands of Newars, and many Newar traders of Uray caste were established in Lhasa and other Tibetan towns, where some of them intermarried with Tibetans. Other Newars settled as shopkeepers in towns and larger villages of the middle-ranges of Nepal, but never penetrated into the areas of high altitude. With the exception of the partly Tibetanized Urays, Newars did not engage to any great extent in long-distance trade, and preferred the settled life of shopkeepers to the more arduous occupation of caravan traders. In localities such as Pokhara they have recently had to compete with Thakalis who extended their operations southwards when Tukche lost its importance as an entrepôt in the salt-trade with Tibet. It is significant that the Thakali merchants soon outstripped their Newar competitors, and are on the way to dominating the mercantile life of Pokhara.

One may well ask why the Thakalis have been more successful entrepreneurs than either the Newars or any of the Bhotia groups not excluding the Sherpas. Their superiority *vis-à-vis* the Newars would seem to lie in their greater spirit of adventure and willingness to take both physical and commercial risks. Long-distance caravan trade makes great demands on the stamina and personal courage of the operators, and in both these qualities the Thakalis of the older generation surpassed the basically urban, comfort-loving and perhaps somewhat timid Newars. The Sherpas and other

Bhotias are the equals of the Thakalis in their indifference to the hardship of travel and willingness to spend long periods away from home, but they have one quality which militates against the building up and retention of great fortunes. They place so much value on generosity and conspicuous consumption that large parts of their trading gains used to be almost invariably spent on lavish hospitality, the commissioning of ritual performances, and often also on outright donations to religious institutions. Compared to the flamboyant Sherpa merchant even the richest Thakali seemed thrifty and anxious to invest whatever wealth he had acquired by his trading ventures. While Sherpas and Newars, though both notable for their business acumen, are almost complete opposites in social values and style of living, the Thakalis combine the outstanding qualities of both these communities without suffering from their weaknesses. Their genius in accumulating and preserving capital assets resulted in the emergence of wealthy families dominating whole communities. None of the Sherpa traders of Khumbu have attained such a position, and even the one outstanding family of Solu centred in Paphlu, though wealthier than any other Sherpa family, did not achieve a political dominance comparable to that of the *subba*-family of Tukche (see p. 145).

There is a correlation between the development of great inequalities in wealth and the transition from the simple barter of basic commodities to a more complex trading pattern involving the use of money as a medium of exchange and the flow of the products of craftsmen, or more recently of manufactured goods, from one ethnic group to the other, sometimes by way of middlemen belonging to neither. Thus, the salt/grain barter can be operated easily by egalitarian societies with constant and predictable needs and a fairly even standard of living. No great capital assets need be invested in the individual deals and the risk of heavy losses is minimal. Even men possessing no means of transport other than their own muscle-power can participate in this trade provided they are prepared to carry heavy loads over difficult routes. Their transactions appear profitable because the time they spend on their journeys is not regarded as an economic asset which could be put to a more rewarding use. But the profits attainable by this kind of trade are limited, even for those able to transport grain and salt on the backs of yak, mules or sheep. Unless the barter of grain for

salt can be combined with trade in commodities convertible into a medium of exchange current in the wider economy beyond the Himalayan borderlands, grain can only buy more salt and salt more grain, which may ultimately be in excess of the requirements of the populations engaged in the barter.

A different situation arises with the development of trade in livestock which can be driven over great distances at little cost and be sold for cash in regions where such cash can be utilized for the purchase of trade goods capable of being disposed of at a large profit. Thus the Sherpa merchants who took large numbers of yak/cattle cross-breeds to Tibet were able to sell them there for cash and use this for the purchase of Tibetan luxury goods in demand in Nepal. Trade deals of this type led to the accumulation of capital which enabled the traders concerned to extend their commercial interests as far as Indian and Tibetan cities. The Thakali customs contractors who acquired the monopoly of the local salt-trade and dealt also in a wide range of Indian and Tibetan trade goods demonstrate that the barter in basic commodities and the complex trade linking the Indian and Tibetan economic spheres were not incompatible. Indeed, those operating the two systems successfully rose to great economic power and their mercantile skill derived from the experience gained in the manipulation of a far-flung commercial network has enabled them to play an active rôle in the development of modern industries.

Whether based on simple barter or on complex, multi-sided deals operated within a monetized economy, the trading activities of the societies here considered are normally the enterprise of individuals, or of small teams of friends or kinsmen pooling their resources for specific undertakings. Though for the sake of safety several traders of a village may combine in mounting a caravan passing through country threatened by robbers (see p. 184), each of the participants carries his own goods, and at the place of destination he seeks to conclude a deal on terms negotiated individually with a partner of his choice.

The only exceptions are certain monastic communities which devote some of their assets to the pursuits of trading. While many of the great monasteries of Tibet used to engage in trade on a large scale, in Nepal there have never been monasteries rich enough to conduct major commercial operations. Yet, some minor trade deals

were financed from monastery funds. Usually it is one of the stewards or managers (*nierwa*) who is in charge of the community's business dealings. He is elected for one year at a time from among the senior monks, and is given a free hand in the utilization of the monastery's liquid assets for the financing of trade deals. If these deals are successful the profits go to the monastery, but if a loss occurs due to the *nierwa*'s fault, he may be asked to make up the loss out of his personal property. Though such trading is done on behalf of the whole monastery, it is conducted by one person in much the same way as the business of an individual trader, and the steward in charge of commerce may go on trading journeys extending over several weeks. During these journeys he acts in the same way as any trader doing business for his own benefit, but on completing a trip he is expected to render full accounts.

The system of official trading stations established recently by the Chinese authorities in the Tibetan border towns and villages runs counter to the tradition that trade deals are transactions between individuals and none of the Nepalese trading communities relish dealing with the impersonal Chinese officials in charge of these trading depots.

I know of no occasions when whole communities engage in ritual or other exchanges of a customary or even compulsory nature. Neither village nor kin-group are economic units which would have machinery for organizing such communal transactions. Nor do the individual trade deals of Sherpas, Bhotias or Thakalis ever assume the character of a gift-exchange in which the economic element is overlaid by ceremonial aspects. There is a clear distinction between business deals in which each partner is interested only in the gain to be obtained and the presentation of objects or money in a ritual context. Gifts presented to the bridal couple on the occasion of a wedding may have to be reciprocated when there is a wedding in the donor's family, but the obligation created is totally different from the need to repay a commercial debt or pay for goods obtained on credit. Similarly donations offered to lamas or monasteries are free gifts for which no other return is expected than the religious merit and the worldly prestige gained by the donor.

There is, however, one institution in which economic and social links are closely intertwined, and this is the ceremonial friendship

formally established between trade partners. The relationship between such friends, known as *mit* in Nepali and *thouwu* in Sherpa, is not one which evolves automatically from frequent contacts and business deals. It has to be formally established and is then as firm a bond as that between kinsmen by blood. Among Sherpas the *thouwu* relationship is not confined to trade-partners residing in different villages for co-villagers too may decide to enter into a friendship pact. Once concluded it is indissoluble, and Sherpas believe that after death *thouwu* may meet again in Devachen, the celestial region of the gods, provided both have been meritorious enough to be reborn in that sphere. Neither parents and children nor husbands and wives are expected to meet again in Devachen, and the bond between ceremonial friends appears thus as more lasting than any other tie. The children of *thouwu* are regarded as consanguineous kin and may not marry, nor may a man marry his *thouwu's* widow. The latter prohibition prevails only among Sherpas, however, and Tibetan ceremonial friends may share a wife in the same way as brothers may be partners in a polyandrous union. Only persons of the same sex can enter into ceremonial relations of friendship, but the number of women formalizing their friendship in such a way is much smaller than that of men.

The conclusion of a friendship pact is accompanied by ritual not unlike that of a wedding. The prospective partner in whose house the ceremony takes place provides a feast, and the other partner or his kinsmen contribute beer and liquor. A lama recites a blessing in which the guests join. Each of the partners has a sponsor corresponding to the kinsmen acting in the rôle of best man at a wedding, and the two *thouwu* sit on one mat with a small table in front of them. After the blessing they are offered beer by their sponsors, and then exchange the cups from which they have drunk. This exchange of drinking cups is the operative act in concluding the friendship pact, and one of the sponsors then makes a speech extolling the importance of the *thouwu* relationship. Thereafter the guests offer ceremonial scarves to the two *thouwu* in the same way as scarves are offered to a bridal couple. The ceremony concludes with the singing of a traditional song and the rest of the evening is devoted to drinking and dancing by the entire company.



While most Sherpa friendship pacts are concluded by men who have a genuine liking for each other as well as common interests, the mechanism of the friendship pact is also used for sealing a reconciliation between men who were involved in disputes either relating to property or resulting from acts of violence. Such *thowwu* relationships are known by special terms, and it is said that men persuaded or compelled to end a quarrel by becoming ceremonial friends lack the feeling of warmth normally characterizing the relationships of *thowwu*.

Friendship pacts may be concluded also between persons belonging to different ethnic groups, and many Sherpas have ceremonial friends among the Rais who are their traditional partners in the exchange of salt for grain. When a Sherpa comes to the house of one of his Rai friends he is sure of a hospitable welcome and of assistance in the disposal of his goods. His Rai friend may himself supply rice in exchange for salt, or offer his help in the conclusion of a trade deal. The fact that such inter-tribal friendship relations are of long standing can be deduced from a Rai legend recorded among the Thulung Rai by Dr. Nicholas Allen in 1971.\* The legend describes how the first Sherpa to enter the Rai country brought with him a quantity of rock-salt – then unknown to the Rais – and offered to enter into a friendship pact with one of the local Rais.

Most Sherpa traders also had ceremonial friends among the Tibetans of the villages lying on their normal trade-routes. The Chinese occupation of Tibet has disrupted these old-established relationships, for the Sherpas are no longer permitted to visit their former friends but may deal only with Chinese officials.

Thakalis and the people of Tarakot as well as the Bhotias of Dolpo and Lo find it useful to build up a network of ceremonial friendships which provide them with reliable contacts in many villages in the areas of their trading interests. Although there is no reason why Sherpas or Bhotias should not have ceremonial friends among high-caste Hindus there are obstacles in the way of making such a friendship truly effective. For no orthodox Hindu can share the food or drink of Bhotias, and the hospitality the two friends can offer each other is hence very limited.

The development of regular markets, such as the weekly market

\* Personal communication.

now held at Namche Bazar, is likely to undermine the system of ceremonial friendship pacts. The trader who is sure to be able to dispose of his goods in an open market where prices find their level according to the law of supply and demand is not in need of intimate contacts with long-standing friends who will purchase or – if unable to do so – store his goods in deference to the obligation of mutual assistance implied in a pact of friendship.

A weekly market of the type now established at Namche Bazar depends for its operation on the availability of a reasonable amount of cash, and it would seem that in many parts of the northern borderlands the money in circulation is not sufficient to meet this condition. In and around places such as Tukche or Tarakot, comparable in other respects to Namche Bazar, there are not enough potential buyers with ready cash at their disposal to encourage the regular gathering of numerous sellers of agricultural produce and consumer goods. Nowhere in Western Nepal, with the possible exception of Pokhara, does tourist traffic serve as yet as a source of cash in the same way as among the Sherpas, and failing such an injection of ready money the economy of the border people does not provide the basis for the development of weekly markets. Nor did open shops ever form part of the trading pattern of the various Bhotia groups or even the Thakalis. In this respect centres of trade such as Tukche and Namche Bazar differ fundamentally from the market towns in the middle-ranges of Nepal where shops kept largely by Newars serve the needs of salaried government officials as well as occasionally those of the peasantry of the surrounding countryside. The merchants of Namche Bazar and Tukche stocked in their houses various commodities, and those familiar with their trading interests experienced little difficulty in purchasing whatever they required, but the character of transactions differed from those in an open shop, and every purchase involved a personal contact different from that between shopkeeper and casual customer.

Inherent in the activities of the traders engaged in the exchange of goods between Nepal, Tibet and India, was the need to traffic with people of different cultural background, and the resultant cross-cultural contacts led inevitably to familiarity with a relatively wide range of customs and attitudes. Sherpas or Thakalis who travelled once a year to the Nepal Terai or to the adjoining districts

of India could not help learning about the style of life and peculiarities of the Hindus of the plains just as their journeys to Tibet had familiarized them with the social life in Tibetan villages and towns. But contact alone, however frequent, does not necessarily lead to the transmission of cultural features, and there are many examples of communities engaged in regular trade deals without influencing each other to any appreciable extent in matters outside the economic sphere.

Neither the Sherpas who journeyed frequently to the rice-growing region of the Rais nor individual Rais who undertook the trek to Namche Bazar to sell their grain imparted to each other any of the features peculiar to their own cultural traditions. The two styles of life were too different to coalesce and there was on neither side any incentive to imitate their trade partners. When Sherpas travelled to Tibet, however, they found themselves within a familiar cultural atmosphere, and readily adopted fashions in dress, items of jewellery and household utensils, and even ideas pertaining to their common Buddhist religious background.

Today, Sherpas are exposed to different influences. The link with Tibet has been broken by the Chinese occupation of that country, and the involvement in tourism has brought a flood of articles of Western origin to the homes of Khumbu. It is too early to say in which way Sherpa society will adjust itself to the increasing contact with the Nepalese civilization of the Kathmandu valley, but as far as one can judge at present there is no conscious tendency to modify Sherpa customs or values in conformity to the Hindu pattern.

The situation of the traders of Thaksatsae is very different. The Thakalis were always posed midway between the Buddhist civilization of Tibet and the Hindu culture prevailing in many of the communities of the middle-ranges. Yet neither influence was strong enough to displace completely their indigenous social system and particularly the 'tribal' elements of their religion which comprises the worship of local deities propitiated with animal sacrifices and an ancestor cult quite different from that practised by Hindu castes. At the height of their economic links with Tibet, Buddhist influence dominated, however, and this dominance expressed itself in the foundation of monasteries and nunneries and the construction of innumerable religious monuments. In the

secular sphere too, and particularly in matters of dress, Thakalis modelled themselves on the Tibetan way of life.

At that time contacts with the Hindu population of the lower regions of Nepal were restricted to occasional trading trips, and while many Thakalis and particularly monks and nuns were familiar with Tibet and literate in Tibetan, there were no occasions to visit Kathmandu and other centres of civilization in Nepal. The Magars, Gurungs and occasional Chetris and Brahmans whom the Thakalis encountered when bartering Tibetan salt and wool for grain were not representative of a civilization or social order superior to that of Thak Khola, and there was no incentive to imitate any of their practices.

The balance of cultural pressures changed, however, when at the end of the nineteenth century Thakali traders began to obtain contracts for the collection of customs duty and with them certain administrative powers. As government contractors they had to visit Kathmandu and their business arising from the salt monopoly brought them in contact with officials and other higher Hindu castes. At the height of the power of the Ranas as hereditary prime ministers of Nepal, orthodox Hindu ideas about the ranking and interrelations of castes received the full backing of an autocratic government, and Thakali traders and contractors must have experienced difficulties in moving in a society differing in structure so greatly from their own. Their Buddhist faith as well as their style of dress and manner of living stamped them at once as Bhotia and so pronounced was the contempt of the high-caste Hindus for the beef-eating and hence 'unclean' Tibetans and other Bhotias, that the Thakalis, however wealthy, could not establish satisfactory social relations with the dominant classes of Nepalese society.

The Thakali traders, and particularly those benefiting directly from the salt monopoly resented this situation, and tried to raise their social status. They realized that in order to become acceptable to the higher Hindu castes, they had to shed such practices as the eating of yak meat, which counts in Hindu eyes as beef, and even the drinking of home-brewed beer. As more and more Thakalis began to extend their trade to towns dominated by high-caste Hindus, their determination to rid themselves of the identification with Bhotias increased. They gave up dressing in Tibetan fashion

and abandoned other outward features of Tibetan culture. The next step taken by the advocates of reform was an attack on Buddhist religion and ritual, and particularly on the recruitment of boys and girls to religious orders. Significantly they did not interfere with the activities of the shamanistic priests of the pre-Buddhist tribal religion which had survived side by side with Buddhism, for the sacrifice of rams and goats at the rites of this religion seemed conveniently similar to the animal sacrifices of such highly placed Hindu castes as Thakuris and Chetris.

Not content with altering the image of the Thakalis in the eyes of high-caste Hindus, the reformers tried to prove that the Thakalis had originally been Thakuris connected with the Hindu dynasty which used to rule over Sinja and Jumla. Although the protagonists of Hindu as against Buddhist social attitudes and practices were at first in a minority composed mainly of the wealthy merchant families of Tukche, the majority has followed their lead in the conviction that a bid for high status in the hierarchic order of Nepalese society even if bought at the expense of some sacrifices and inconveniences, will ultimately benefit the entire Thakali community. This does not mean that social ambitions have resulted in the wholesale rejection of Buddhist traditions or a complete conversion to a Hindu way of life, but in their attitudes to the other inhabitants of Thak Khola the Thakalis have certainly moved away from the tolerance of ethnic differences so characteristic of Buddhist ideology. They have begun to apply criteria based on Hindu ideas of purity and pollution to their neighbours, and look down upon the Bhotias of Baragaon who observe none of the dietary taboos which Thakalis have learnt to accept.

But while anxious to improve their own status in the Hindu-dominated caste society of Nepal, the Thakalis have so far shown no inclination to act as protagonists of a more general movement of Hinduisation. With the decline of the trade with Tibet and the shift of their economic interests to the lower-lying regions of Nepal the usefulness of appearing in the eyes of Bhotia trade partners as fellow Buddhists and heirs to a common tradition has been greatly reduced, and the Thakalis do not see any advantage in passing on Hindu ideas of caste-status to people whom they consider as socially and economically inferior. The more Thakalis regard themselves as a distinct cast rather than as one of the

inter-related ethnic groups of Thak Khola, the greater is the tendency to adopt the Hindu idea of the coexistence of inherently different endogamous communities confined within rigid social boundaries.

A parallel to the position of the Thakalis, and particularly that of the people of Tukche, can be detected in the situation of the Taralis of Tarakot. This community too stands between two contrasting spheres, and derives its livelihood largely from its rôle as intermediary between people lacking the ability and perhaps the will to forge direct economic contacts. Like the Thakalis of a generation ago, the Taralis are active in trade with their Bhotia neighbours, and when visiting their villages and conversing with them in their own Tibetan dialect they appear, if not true Bhotias, then certainly as members of a community well established within the Buddhist orbit. Yet, only part of their life is spent within that orbit, for during half of the year they travel and trade among the Nepali-speaking people of the middle-ranges. There they have to come to terms with the social attitudes and concepts of people who cannot think otherwise than in caste terms. To be acceptable in that sphere they call themselves Magars, speak fluent Nepali and dress in Nepali style. Like Thakalis they play down their Buddhist traditions, and thus avoid being classified as Bhotias by a society used to associating Tibetan Buddhism with such polluting practices as beef eating and beer drinking, the custom of polyandry and a general sexual permissiveness objectionable in Hindu eyes. At home in Tarakot Buddhist temples are still being maintained, but the alienation of the younger men from the traditional religion is as noticeable as it was in Thaksatsae when the Thakalis first succumbed to the influence of Hindu ideas.

Neither community has ever concerned itself with the mission to pass on Hindu ideas to their northern neighbours or, even at the height of Tibetan prestige, act as agents for the transmission of Buddhist culture to the tribal people of the middle-ranges. They were hard-headed traders dealing in salt and grain and such other commodities as could profitably be transported from one economic sphere to the other, not protagonists of the cultural achievements of either. It is perhaps this non-committal attitude to ideological matters and their chameleon-like ability to present two different façades to their trading partners in contrasting cultural orbits

which fitted them so well for the rôle of middlemen and helped them to achieve outstanding commercial successes. In this respect they differed from the Sherpas of Khumbu, who never disguised their firm allegiance to Tibetan Buddhism and seemed undisturbed by the Hindu prejudice against all 'Bhotias'. Among the wealthy Sherpas of Solu, however, a comparable tendency to adapt in dress and some external aspects of their style of life to the dominant Nepalese pattern has become apparent in recent years. Involvement in national politics has inevitably moved the leading families of Solu towards closer association with the dominant sections of Hindu society but as yet there has been no attempt either to denounce Buddhism or to bid for a status within the caste-system dependent on a conjectural descent from high-caste Hindu ancestors. In the new atmosphere of a society gradually moving towards secularization and modernization the Sherpas may be able to side-step the problem of ritual status within the traditional caste-hierarchy and attain a social and political position commensurate to their economic strength and hence satisfying their aspirations.

What are the prospects of the trading communities of Nepal's northern borderlands for the foreseeable future? If we exclude the possibility of a political upheaval in China which would restore the independence of Tibet and the authority of the Dalai Lama, a complete revival of the commercial and cultural relations with their Tibetan neighbours seems highly unlikely. Most probably the border trade will be kept at the present low level. This suits the Chinese who are in need of certain basic commodities such as grain and butter, but who do not favour a more extensive trade which would involve close contact between traders from Nepal and the Tibetan population of villages and towns beyond the immediate border zone. The modest level of trade established after the period of almost complete disruption in the years 1959-62 is likely to enable the people of such areas as Dolpo and Mugu to survive without the need for a drastic restructuring of their economy. But their standard of living may not completely recover from the reduction suffered during those years. The inaccessibility of their traditional grazing grounds in Tibet has limited the scope of their animal husbandry, and it is doubtful whether the alternative pastures south-west of Dolpo will ever prove a complete replacement for the lost Tibetan facilities. Trade too is now confined to a

narrow range of goods which allows little latitude to the enterprising and skilful trader.

In the distant future Dolpo may benefit from tourism in the same way as Khumbu has done, for the landscape is spectacular and access by light aircraft is by no means impossible. Many tourists already visit the Kali Gandaki valley as far as Jomosom and will undoubtedly extend their tours to Mustang once the government decides to open that border district to foreign travellers. But the trek from Thak Khola to Dolpo, which involves the crossing of passes well over 18,000 feet, is extremely strenuous and can never become as popular a tourist route as the relatively easy trek to Namche Bazar. Moreover, Dolpo offers great natural beauty but none of the facilities the Sherpas of Khumbu have learnt to provide for their visitors. Hence, earnings from tourism may help to raise the standard of living of the next generation of Bhotias but are certainly not a solution to present problems.

A different and more promising situation prevails in Thak Khola. Most of the big Thakali traders have transferred their business to other parts of Nepal, and their great houses in Tukche are being looked after by caretakers or have been let to families from Baragaon or to Tibetan refugees. One or two houses, which were still standing in 1962, have collapsed, but on the whole Tukche has retained its rôle as *entrepôt* on the Kali Gandaki trade-route. The volume of trade has diminished and new settlers have replaced those of the former inhabitants who sought more profitable trading opportunities in Pokhara, Bhairawa and Kathmandu, but as long as there is any trade with Tibet the dwellers in Thak Khola, whatever their origin, are cast for the part of middlemen. Scenery of outstanding beauty and interest, and the proximity of both Dhaulagiri and Annapurna, are tourist attractions of the highest order, and since the greater part of Thak Khola lies outside the zone affected by the monsoon it is accessible during times of the year when the eastern parts of Nepal are unsuitable for trekking. The Thakalis' experience in catering for travellers – an experience gained mainly by women keeping wayside inns and tea-stalls along the old trade-routes – should help to build up an industry which in time may well match the tourist business so successfully conducted by the Sherpas of Khumbu.

We would be unrealistic, however, to ignore the long-distance



threat which hangs over all the border people who relied for centuries and perhaps millennia on the trans-Himalayan trade in salt and grain. If the unchecked growth of the population of Nepal should ever lead to a situation where there is no more surplus of grain for export this trade would come to a standstill and high-altitude dwellers unable to live on the resources of their sparse habitat, such as the people of Dolpo, would be deprived of an essential pillar of their economy. A development similarly calamitous for the trading communities on Nepal's northern border could be brought about by so great an improvement of communications with India that the market for Tibetan salt in the middle-ranges completely disappears. In such an event, they would have nothing to exchange for the grain both they and their former trading partners in Tibet require. The way of life of the trans-Himalayan traders would then come to an end, and the Bhotia population of such regions as Dolpo would join the many populations of the world who could survive only by abandoning their ancestral lands and seeking their fortunes in areas more favoured by current economic and political forces. All those who have had the opportunity of sampling the quality of life engendered by the challenge of an environment which has compelled man to develop a remarkably high degree of self-reliance, coupled with tolerance, must view such an eventuality with apprehension and cherish the hope that still unforeseen factors may avert the economic decline of communities contributing so strikingly to the richness of Nepal's cultural pattern.

# Glossary

<i>bakhu</i> (Tib.)	Tibetan-style coat, usually made of woollen material, sometimes fur-lined.
Bhot	Tibet.
Bhotia	generic term for the Tibetan-speaking and largely Buddhist populations of the Himalayan region.
Brahman	the highest of the twice-born Hindu castes, traditionally associated with priestly functions. See also Upadhya and Jaisi.
<i>chang</i> (Tib.)	home-brewed beer made of barley, wheat, rice, millet or maize.
<i>chaur</i> (Nep.)	term used in Western Nepal to describe open pastures at high altitude, usually surrounded by forest.
<i>chikyap</i> (Tib.)	headman.
<i>chorten</i> (Tib.)	Buddhist monument corresponding to the Indian <i>stupa</i> ; usually built of stone.
Chetri	Hindu caste of Kshatriya status, ranking below Thakuris.
<i>dal</i> (Nep.)	pulses of various kinds.
Damai	tailor of untouchable status.
<i>desa</i> (Tib.)	herdsmen's camp.
<i>dharni</i> (Nep.)	measure of weight equivalent to 5 lbs.
<i>dhigur</i> (Nep.)	rotating credit association.
Drokpa	Tibetan nomad; in Humla referred to as Choba.
<i>dzo</i> (Tib.)	hybrid bovine resulting from the crossing of yak with common cattle; the male is referred to as <i>dzopa</i> (Sherpa: <i>zopkiok</i> ), and the female as <i>dzomo</i> (Sherpa: <i>zum</i> ).
<i>gebu</i> (Tib.)	village-headman (in the usage of Bhotias of Humla).
<i>gembu</i> (Sherpa)	Sherpa dignitary whose jurisdiction extends over several villages.
<i>ghi</i> (Nep.)	clarified butter.
<i>goth</i> (Nep.)	temporary settlement of herdsmen.
<i>gompa</i> (Tib.)	Buddhist temple.

<i>gova</i> (Tib.)	village-headman (in the usage of Bhotias of Walongchung).
<i>gunsa</i> (Tib.)	winter-settlement, usually situated at a relatively low elevation.
Jaisi	issue of an irregular union of a Brahman man and a Brahman woman, debarred from acting as priest.
<i>jat</i> (Nep.)	caste.
<i>jau</i> (Nep.)	barley of the 'covered' variety.
Kami	blacksmith of untouchable status.
Khamba	(originally) inhabitant of the Tibetan province of Kham; (in a wider sense) any Tibetan settler in Nepal.
<i>khamendeu</i> (Sherpa)	designation of a class of low social status found among Sherpas.
<i>kipat</i> (Nep.)	a form of communal land-tenure prevalent in Eastern Nepal.
<i>kodu</i> (Nep.)	millet ( <i>eleusine coracana</i> ).
<i>lalmohar</i> (Nep.)	royal seal (lit. 'red palm'); decree or other official document bearing the royal seal.
<i>lama</i> (Tib.)	Buddhist priest or monk.
<i>lekh</i> (Nep.)	mountain, hill-range.
<i>lha-khang</i> (Tib.)	lit.: god's room; Buddhist chapel in a private house.
<i>lupal</i> (Nep.)	pair of carrier-bags used on pack sheep or goats.
<i>mani</i> (Tib.)	Buddhist stone-inscription (derived from the sacred-formula <i>om mani padme hum</i> ).
<i>mani-wall</i>	free-standing stone-structure, usually in the middle of a path, consisting of a wall surmounted by inscribed stone tablets.
<i>matwali</i> (Nep.)	drinker of alcoholic beverages; <i>matwali</i> have a low status in the Hindu caste-hierarchy.
<i>mit</i> (Nep.)	ceremonial friend.
<i>mukhya</i> (Nep.)	headman.
<i>muri</i> (Nep.)	measure of capacity used for measuring grain; equivalent to 2.4 bushels or 20 <i>pathi</i> ; the approximate of 1 <i>muri</i> of wheat, barley or millet is 67.3 kg.
<i>naua</i> (Sherpa)	Sherpa village official.
Newar	indigenous population of the Kathmandu valley and creators of its historic civilization; small

	Newar communities and individual Newar families are found in commercial centres throughout Nepal.
<i>ngalok</i> (Sherpa)	labour gang organized on a voluntary basis and comprising persons of the same sex and similar age.
Nyingmapa (Tib.)	one of the 'unreformed' sects of Tibetan Buddhism; the lamas of this sect wear red hats.
<i>paisa</i> (Nep.)	smallest monetary unit; there are 100 <i>paisa</i> in 1 rupee.
<i>panchayat</i> (Nep.)	lit.: council of five; generic term for village- and district-councils.
<i>panchayati raj</i> (Nep.)	the political system of basic democracy introduced in Nepal in 1962.
<i>pathi</i> (Nep.)	measure of capacity used for measuring grain, salt, etc., roughly equivalent to 1 gallon.
<i>pembu</i> (Sherpa)	village dignitary and collector of land-revenue.
Rai	Tibeto-Burman speaking tribe in Eastern Nepal.
<i>rakshi</i> (Nep.)	distilled country liquor.
<i>rhu, rhuba</i> (Tib.)	patrilineal clan or lineage.
R	abbreviation for Nepali rupee(s); in the 1960s and 1970s the value of the Nepali rupee has been fluctuating between the rates of R20 to 25 to the £ sterling.
<i>sanad</i> (Nep.)	document containing government order or decree.
<i>sirdar</i> (Nep.)	leader of gang of labourers or porters.
<i>subba</i> (Nep.)	an official in the Nepali civil service; magistrate; the administrative head of a district in the early nineteenth century.
<i>taluqdar</i> (Urdu)	functionary in charge of the collection of land-tax in a village or group of villages.
Tamang	Tibeto-Burman speaking tribe in Central and Eastern Nepal; the term Tamang is also used as euphemistic designation of some Bhotia communities in Western Nepal.
Thakuri	Hindu caste of Kshatriya status ranking next to Brahmans in the caste-hierarchy.
<i>tāmrapatra</i> (Nep.)	copper-plate inscribed with official order.
<i>thanka</i> (Tib.)	painted scroll; usually depicting Buddhist divinities or saints.

*thouwu* (Sherpa)

*tsampa* (Tib.)

*ua* (Nep.)

Upadhya

*vamśavali* (Nep.)

ceremonial friend.

flour made of barley which has been roasted before being ground.

barley of the 'naked' variety (*Hordeum agriocrithon*).

Brahman of highest rank and pure ancestry; capable of acting as priest.

chronicle containing genealogies of prominent families.

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